

The
THREE KEYS



FREDERIC ORMOND

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THE THREE KEYS



— Bert Huisman —
"I AM SO GLAD THAT YOU CAN DO SOMETHING
TO HELP *HIM*."

THE THREE KEYS

BY
FREDERIC ORMOND

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CHAPTER I

THE END OF ALL THINGS

MORRIS LATHROP gave a final glance toward his reflection in the mirror, and assured himself that his toilette for the evening was immaculate. Then, he took from his pocket a solitary dollar bill, at which he stared for a long time in rueful contemplation.

"The sole remnant of my fortune," he muttered, finally; "my last dollar—absolutely, the last!" But he shrugged his shoulders contemptuously as he thrust the bill back into a pocket. "At least, it will serve to pay my cab-fare to the Trevors'," was his reflection. "And I'll make my last night on earth a merry one. None

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shall see the shadow of death on my brow.
. . . And yet—I wonder where I shall
be to-morrow, when they find this body,
after the flight of that which is called the
soul!”

But, since he had definitely resolved to
make an end of himself, such speculation
troubled Morris Lathrop very little. It
seemed to him that, inasmuch as he had
dissipated a fortune, he might throw away
life itself as well. So far as he could de-
termine, he possessed no art for the accu-
mulation of money, even had he the incli-
nation, which he had not. For that mat-
ter, now at the last, he found himself
rather weary of the frivolous round which
had made up his life. He had but one sin-
cere sorrow before the prospect of death,
and that lay in the giving up of Carla Tre-
vor, to whom he was betrothed—for the
final interview with whom he was now set-
ting forth.

It was only a few blocks from the apart-

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ment-house in which Lathrop had his suite to the mansion of George Trevor, the financier, where the début of Edna Trevor, the younger daughter, was to be celebrated that night. It was such a little way, indeed, that the cab-driver thanked his fare when the young man gave him the fag end of a fortune in the guise of a dollar bill.

"And I suppose the fellow envies me!" Lathrop mused cynically, as he mounted the steps.

"The ladies are not down yet, sir," the butler explained, as the visitor entered the vestibule; "but Mr. Trevor is in the library. Will you go there, sir?"

Lathrop nodded, and forthwith made his way to the library, which he entered unannounced. The only occupant of the room was a handsome man of some three-score years, whose clear eyes and complexion proclaimed both a good constitution and a clean manner of life. The iron-

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gray hair still clustered thickly; his spare frame was held vigorously erect. The whole aspect of the man suggested the consciousness of power. Yet, at this moment, the strong, stern face was relaxed into an expression that betrayed acute anxiety. Then, as he looked up at the opening of the door, and saw Lathrop, a sudden relief shone in his eyes.

"Ah, Morris, it was good of you to come early," he exclaimed. "We have a full hour for a smoke and a chat. Help yourself to a cigar and a glass of wine, my boy . . . I must talk to you seriously. I am going to ask a favor of you, Morris."

"A favor!" the young man repeated, in evident surprise. "But, sir, between us two, it is you who have the power of granting favors, not I."

The financier smiled, wryly.

"It happens that—just now, at least—you are wrong, Morris," he said sadly. "I know that, since the death of your

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father, you have looked on me as taking his place toward you in some measure. I for my part, have looked on you as a son, especially since your engagement to my daughter. So, I am sure that you will respect what I am about to say."

"Is it to be a lecture, sir?" Lathrop inquired apprehensively.

"On the contrary!" the financier declared with emphasis. "But I shall come to the point at once . . . Morris, I am on the verge of failure. I may contrive to hold out for three days longer—I believe that I can. But, unless I have assistance at the expiration of that time, I must go to the wall."

"Great heavens!" the young man exclaimed, in dismay. "Why, pater, I thought that you were worth—"

"—somewhere between fifteen and twenty millions. So I am; but at this time every dollar of it is tied up—pledged. There is only one way by which I can

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avoid the crash, and that way lies through you, my boy. . . . You inherited from your father something more than a million dollars, did you not?"

"Yes, nearly two," Lathrop answered. Dread fell on him as he apprehended the significance of Trevor's question.

"A few hundred thousands—say, four or five—will save me," the financier went on. "I want you to come to my office in the morning, and inspect all there is to inspect, satisfy yourself of what you are doing, and then, in return for a partnership in the business, let me have the money. Will you do it, Morris?"

For a full minute, Lathrop sat perfectly still, staring dumbly at his companion. He was face to face with a difficulty which he saw no means of surmounting. He had inherited two millions; in five years, he had succeeded in squandering them to the last dollar. But he had kept the secret of his spendthrift habits so carefully that

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not one of his associates suspected the condition of his finances. His debts were paid to the smallest item; it was because he would not incur debts which he could not pay that he had decided to sink quietly out of existence. He believed that he had injured nobody but himself, and that, therefore, he had the right to dispose of his life even as he had disposed of his fortune. He had regretted only one thing, the giving up of Carla Trevor. But he believed, with the cynicism of a man of the world, that she would soon recover from the shock of his sudden taking off. Now, however, he was suddenly confronted by a difficulty of which the possibility had never occurred to him, a difficulty that threatened his complacency in the face of a cowardly purpose. For a moment, he found himself incapable of making any answer to the financier's question, the while he remained staring bewilderedly into the elder man's face. Presently, he saw a frown gather-

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ing upon the broker's brow, and heard him say, with some coldness:

"If I had thought, Morris, that you could hesitate, I should not have made the request."

Morris pulled himself together then, and smiled with a semblance of sincerity.

"Did I seem to hesitate, pater?" he said. "I was only wondering as to how it could be accomplished in three days."

"You will do it, then? You will let me have the money?" exclaimed the elder man, his face lighting up with a joy that he did not care to conceal.

"I mean," was the earnest answer, "that there has never been a time since I can remember when you could not have had every dollar that I possessed. I wish that I had placed it all in your hands long ago. Then, you would not have been compelled to ask for it now."

"Tut, tut, Morris! If that had been the case, you might have been in this un-

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pleasant fix with me, and therefore unable to help me out. My boy, you have made me very happy. I shall sleep well to-night. How is your money invested, Morris? In bonds and stock, I suppose. If so, they will be easily negotiable for my purposes."

"What is the exact amount that you will require, pater?" asked Morris, ignoring Trevor's question.

"Well, half-a-million would be ample. I might possibly pull out with less, but that amount would mean entire safety."

"And when must you have it?" Lathrop continued.

"This is Wednesday. I should like to have it to-morrow. I must have it, at the latest, by Saturday noon."

"Indeed!" Lathrop exclaimed. To disguise his despair from the other's observation, he continued with an assumption of relief in his voice: "Oh, well, that gives us quite time enough."

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“And you surely will not fail me, Morris?” the financier questioned, pitifully insistent.

“Fail you?” Lathrop repeated, thoughtfully. Then, after a moment’s pause, he spoke very solemnly:

“Sir, if I am alive, you will have the money on time.”

CHAPTER II

THE GENESIS OF A CRIMINAL

THE conference of the two men in the library was interrupted by the entrance of Edna Trevor, come in search of her father. The débutante possessed a face of charming piquancy and a manner shyly vivacious. Just now, however, there was an obvious attempt at hauteur, by which the young lady of society meant to mask the natural, mischievous gaiety of the schoolgirl. Lathrop greeted her warmly, for he was very fond of Carla's sister, and, presently, after having paid her the compliments demanded by the occasion, he accompanied her to the drawing-room, in quest of his betrothed.

He found Carla Trevor exquisite to-night, as always. As she gave him her

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hand in greeting, he forgot all else for the moment, and regarded her fondly, with the pride of possession. The warm pressure of her fingers thrilled him, and added a subtle zest to the rapture of beholding her loveliness. His delighted eyes rested for an instant on the coronal of golden hair, then fell eagerly to the dainty, radiant face, in which the violet eyes now shown so brilliantly and so tenderly on him. Never had she looked more beautiful than now.

"You have seen papa?" she asked, after some swiftly-whispered words from her lover that set her to blushing happily.

"Yes," Lathrop replied; "I left him only a minute ago."

"I know that he was anxious to see you to-night," Carla continued. "Something is troubling him, but he will not tell me what it is—indeed, he says it is nothing. Do you—?"

Lathrop evaded the question ere it was completed by a quick word of praise for

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her gown, and thus for the moment beguiled her attention.

"And will you forgive me if I go away very early?" he inquired. "I have a number of things that must be attended to at once."

"Oh, something for papa! Is it not?" Carla exclaimed.

"Yes," Lathrop admitted.

"Of course, Morris, I shall miss you horribly," the girl said, "but you must do as you think best. And I am so glad that you can do something to help *him*!"

An hour later, Morris Lathrop left the Trevor mansion, and took his way slowly on foot toward his apartments. For the first time since he had reached man's estate, he was profoundly distressed. The many things that he must do, of which he had spoken to his fiancée, were in truth one single thing: he must solve the problem Fate had set before him.

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“‘To do a great right, do a little wrong,’” he quoted, as he entered the parlor of his suite, threw off his overcoat, and stood contemplating the glowing coals in the grate. “I have heard that somewhere, but, in my case, I must change it a bit: ‘To do a great right, make an infernal scoundrel of yourself!’”

He remained for some time wrapped in thought, but, at last, with an exclamation of determination, he rose from his chair, crossed the room, and, having unlocked a drawer of his desk, took from it a revolver and a small packet of paper, of the sort used by chemists in putting up powders. These objects, he placed side by side on the desk, and then surveyed them with a contemptuous smile.

“I had decided to use one or the other of them before morning,” he said grimly: “decided, as I believed, irrevocably. Now, I am no longer free to follow my own

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choice in the matter. I find myself condemned to live. So—”

He thrust the revolver back into its drawer, and tossed the packet on the coals. Afterward, he seated himself, and watched the burning of the paper that had held the poison.

George Trevor had been the dearest friend of Jason Lathrop, the father of Morris. Twice, his aid had saved the elder Lathrop from financial ruin. The gratitude thus inspired in the father had been passed on to the son, as a part of his heritage. In addition to this, Trevor was the father of the girl to whom Lathrop had become engaged; for Carla's sake, he must do everything possible in Trevor's behalf. And, finally, by reason of personal intimacy with the financier since his father's death, Morris had come to regard George Trevor almost as his own parent; he felt for the old man an affection truly filial.

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Thus, it was brought about that this unexpected appeal from the one man on earth whom he most esteemed and loved, filled him with consternation. Confused by the suddenness of the catastrophe, he found himself wholly unable to explain to the broker the fact as to his own shattered fortunes. He dared not confess the cowardice by which he had planned to make an end of his life. In consequence, ere he himself was fully aware of the deed, he had pledged his aid to Trevor. The instantaneous relief effected on the spirits of his friend by this promise restrained him from any withdrawal of it afterward. Now, therefore, he had become involved inextricably in an undertaking at once absurd and impossible of achievement. He, a penniless man, was expected to provide immediately the sum of half-a-million dollars!

Nevertheless, Lathrop stood up suddenly to the full six feet of his height, and

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set his broad shoulders squarely, belligerently; and his clean-cut face grew cold and hard.

"Well, it's for the old man," he said aloud, softly; "and—somehow—*I am going to do it!*"

Presently, the tenseness of his pose relaxed. He drew his chair a little closer to the fire, seated himself, and again became absorbed in reflection.

"Five hundred thousand!" he mused. "And the pater asked me for it as easily as though I could just step out of doors, and pick it up anywhere in the street. Well, I fancy that is what I shall be compelled to do—with certain modifications. I can't borrow such a sum; all the security I have to offer would hardly bring me five hundred dollars. I suppose that I might get five, or even ten, thousand from Jack Millington, on my I. O. U. I'll have to do that for pin-money. Great heaven, how I hate the bare idea of it! 'Neither

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a borrower, nor a lender be.' Pish! Polonius forgot to advise his son against the evils of stealing. And the simple, unqualified, damnable fact is, that I must steal half-a-million dollars between now and Saturday morning—sooner, if I can!"

Lathrop glanced hastily at his watch.

"I can catch Jack and some of the others at the club yet," he reflected: "and, since I am going to make a downright scoundrel of myself, I might as well begin now. Here's to the crossing of the Rubicon between honesty and crime!"

Half-an-hour later, he entered one of the top-floor rooms of the club, where six men of about his own age were seated around a green-covered table. He proved to be a welcome intruder, for all greeted him warmly.

CHAPTER III

A MILLIONAIRE'S MANŒUVRE

JACK MILLINGTON was the only son of the most successful operator in Wall Street. A few years before this night, the father had bestowed on him two million dollars, along with certain advice worth rather more. The result of these gifts was that Jack had caused his two millions to grow into ten; and, moreover, he was swayed by a keen, sportsmanlike desire to multiply these millions yet oftentimes again. For the rest, he was a brawny, red-visaged young man, brim full of vigorous animal life; but in certain lines of his expression and in the penetrant gleam of his eyes were hints of a masterful shrewdness that lay back of his obvious and constant good-nature. As Morris

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Lathrop entered the card-room of the club, Millington's jovial face beamed welcome, and he saluted his friend noisily:

"Hello, old man!" he called out. "Sit in, won't you? Chapman here has been sweeping the board all the evening, and I haven't won a pot. Maybe you'll break his luck. How much are you in Chappy, eh?"

"Enough to buy breakfast, I think," drawled Chapman, who was a mystery, and seemed to enjoy being one. Nobody knew anything about him, except that he was Harry Chapman, a member of the club, a good fellow, always possessed of cash for any emergency. "Come on Lathrop," he added now. "I can afford a change of luck."

There was the suggestion of a flush on the face of Morris, when he drew the triple stack of chips in front of him, and waited for the cards to be dealt. He had always been scrupulous about his play, and it was

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the first time that he had ever purchased pokerchips without having the money in his pocket to pay for them. It was all done in a moment, however, and he felt as though he had lost something he could never regain—as though he had plunged in one instant from the pedestal of manhood into the depths of degradation. Little did his friends know of the battle that was raging within him when he accepted those chips. But he did it, and sighed. And then his face grew stern; the softness, the geniality, the infectious merriment departed out of it, as a light goes out in a room and leaves it in sudden darkness. He played differently, too. Heretofore, although uniformly lucky, he had played carelessly, with apparent indifference. Now, he watched every card; now, he played to win.

For that very reason, doubtless, he lost. The cards were not kind to him, and, when, as daylight showed dimly, the play ceased,

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he wrote his I. O. U., for some hundreds on the back of one of the cards, and passed it to Chapman, with the remark:

“Settle to-night, old man.”

“Shall we play till the house opens, and then have breakfast?” Chapman suggested.

But the others demurred, and, presently, Millington and Lathrop left the club together, in the gray of the morning, and, arm-in-arm, strode down the avenue.

As they halted in front of the young millionaire's home, the latter said:

“Come in, Morris, and have a B. and S., unless you are in a hurry for some sleep. I'm off for Chicago on the eight-thirty. I'll have my nap on the train.”

“Will you be long away, Jack?” Lathrop asked, as he followed his friend up the steps.

“I don't know—a fortnight, perhaps,” Millington replied. “The governor cabled me last night—he's in Paris, you

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know—that a lot of pirates are making ducks and drakes of his interests in the West, and there is nothing for it except that I must run out and fix things up for him. Deuced bother it is, too!”

“I wish you had some business tact about you, Morris,” he remarked suddenly, after they had reached his study, and ensconced themselves comfortably.

“Why?” Lathrop questioned, in astonishment.

“Well, there are a lot of things I want attended to to-day,” was the answer, “and, if you were something more than an animated fashion-plate—no offense, old man!—you might do me no end of a favor. As it is, I’ve got to write half-a-dozen letters of instruction, and then worry all the time I am away for fear that they won’t be heeded. It’s beastly unfortunate that I’ve got to go just at this time.”

“Well, why do you go?” Lathrop inquired, carelessly.

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Millington stared at his friend, and then laughed outright.

"You don't know the governor," he said. "When he says go, I go, if it costs a million. You see, the cable didn't get here until after ten. I had no chance to see anybody, and I must catch the Empire."

"Why didn't you ask Chapman?" Lathrop demanded.

"I don't like him," Millington declared, with a shake of the head. "I'd rather take chances than have him nosing around my affairs."

"Courtright was there. He's on the Street; he could do it for you—whatever it is."

"What an innocent you are, Morris. Still, of course, you don't know. How should you? I'd take Courtright's word for any amount, and he would mine; but we'd cut each other's throats down on the Street in a minute. It would take him about half-an-hour to find out how he

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could cut mine, and he'd do it, too, while I am away."

"What is it you want done, anyway?" Lathrop asked, indifferently. "Perhaps, I could do it."

"Of course, you could do it, if you would. There really isn't much to do, you know. Only, keep your eyes open, and watch things while I'm away. There are about a hundred and one things to attend to to-day, but, after that, just be on the alert and ready to snap whenever there is anything to snap at. By Jove. I have half a mind to ask you to do it."

"Do so, if you think I am capable," Lathrop said.

"Do you mean it?"

"Why, certainly," was Lathrop's ready reply.

At that, Millington chuckled contentedly.

"Lord, what a load you have taken from my mind!" he exclaimed.

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"Well, I may take a load from your bank-account, as well," Morris suggested, with a secret self-disdain.

"No fear of that, if you follow instructions," Millington retorted. "And what a joke, too!" he added, gleefully.

"A joke?" his friend repeated, puzzled. "How so?"

"Oh," came the explanation, "because they won't know what to make of you down there. You have never dealt any, have you? No," he continued, as Lathrop shook his head, "I thought not. Gad! I've a good notion to put up a job on Cummings. I owe him one from a little deal last Fall. How much cash have you in bank, Morris?"

"Very little, from your standpoint, Jack," was the quiet reply. To himself, Lathrop added, "At least, I told no lie then."

"Anyhow, that part of it doesn't matter," Millington went on, joyously. "I'll

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fix that up. I have an idea that I see a way in which to make this trip of mine profitable. You see, I want to play a game on Cummings, and this is the time when it can be done. He'll know that I am away, and he will plan to play mouse to my cat. If you will do just as I say, you can add a hundred thousand or so to your bank-account, Morris, during the time that I am away." He paused to grin delightedly. "And so can I," he concluded. "Will you help me out, old man?"

"Yes, Jack," Lathrop agreed. Of a sudden, now, his manner was become very serious; his face had whitened.

"Done, then!" Millington cried, boisterously. "And, so, to business!"

The ensuing hour was devoted to discussing stocks, bonds, securities, collaterals, puts and calls, longs and shorts, different men and the motives governing them, along with a general history of the

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operations in which Millington had been engaged for months past. A check was drawn, payable to Morris Lathrop, for twenty-five thousand dollars, which he was to deposit in his bank at once; then, a small check-book was signed throughout in blank by Millington, so that Lathrop could fill in the amounts as he found necessary in carrying out the directions of his friend. Arrangements were made so that Lathrop could deal on the Exchange in his own name, and keep from the knowledge of others that he represented Millington at all, except for a few immediate duties to be attended to this same day—the things that had been giving the young financier most anxiety when the conversation began.

Finally, and, for the purposes of this history, most important of all—the millionaire disengaged three keys from the ring that he carried in his pocket, and passed them to his friend.

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"These are for the safe-deposit vaults that I mentioned," he said. "This one"—he regarded it for a moment before passing it over to Lathrop, as if, at that instant, some misgiving concerning what he was doing entered his mind; as if some prophetic sting, warning him of the danger and disgrace of which the act was the forerunner, compelled him to hesitate—"opens the safe at the Westmoreland which, as I have already told you, is my own. Everything in it is mine, but you will find the bundle named in your memoranda directly in front. The other securities, if you need them, you will have to search for. But you have a complete list of everything, so I need not go over it again."

"All right, Jack," Lathrop said quietly, as he took the key from his friend.

"This key fits the safe at the Midland," Millington continued. "That, also, is mine, but there is a good bit of the govern-

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or's there, too. You won't have to go to it before the first of the week, when you spring that deal on Cummings. You understand, Morris?"

"I understand," Lathrop declared, his voice expressionless.

Millington spoke now with an added emphasis:

"And this," he said, "is the key of the safe the governor and I have together at the Westmoreland. And, too, it is the key of our success, should Cummings prove a little stronger at first than I think he will. Should he crowd you, you will be forced to use this key. Your memoranda will tell you precisely what to do in that case. I hope, Morris, that it will not become necessary for you to use this key. I am confident that it will not be. But, if the need comes, don't hesitate! Everything may depend on your being ready on the instant . . . Keep those keys, so that you will

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know each from the others, without any doubt. And that is all, I think."

"That is all, I think," Lathrop agreed, simply.

CHAPTER IV

THE REWARD OF VILLAINY

LATHROP refused his friend's invitation to breakfast. His one anxiety now was to part company with Millington at the earliest moment possible, for he felt himself unequal to the task of playing his part longer. He was, indeed, as one distraught before this opportunity thrust upon him by the long arm of coincidence. The fate which had hitherto mocked him now set the half-million of his desire fairly within his grasp. The thing was quite incredible: nevertheless, it was true. It seemed to Lathrop that, in a measure, the heinousness of the deed he planned was mitigated by the fact of its simplicity. He had resolved to venture

THE REWARD OF VILLAINY

the extreme of rascality for his friend's sake. And, at once when his purpose had been formed, the required money was put in his possession. Destiny itself justified the theft!

At least, then, he would be enabled to save Trevor from disaster. For the rest, it was possible that, within the fortnight of Millington's absence, the securities might be recovered and replaced. In that event, his own reputation would remain unsmirched, although his self-respect must suffer always. Yet, he knew that the chances were against such success. In all probability, some day, near or distant, would witness his shame before the world.

"But, always, there is the pistol," Lathrop muttered, as he hurried down the avenue. "As well one time as another for its use. The only difference is that I hate the thought of dying disgraced. The idea of being known as a thief is ex-

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ceedingly unpleasant to me. Still, I am not sure that it will matter to me—after I am dead.”

He did not return to his apartment, but, instead, continued on down the avenue until he reached the Holland House, where he stopped to breakfast. He wished to relieve Trevor's anxiety as quickly as possible, so, when he had done eating, he hastened down Broadway on foot. He fretted, half-amusedly, over the slowness of his progress, to which he was constrained by the fact that he was without wherewith to pay for cab or car.

This lack, however, was soon remedied, for his route led by the Beekman Bank, where he was known. Here, then, he entered, and sought the president, to whom he offered Millington's check.

“I should like to open an account with you, Mr. Morton,” he explained, “if you will accept so small a sum for a beginning.”

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The president glanced at the check, and smiled.

"Twenty-five thousand? I wish all beginners were as good," he declared, genially. "We are very glad to have you with us, Mr. Lathrop; very glad, indeed! Take a seat, please, and I'll have the matter arranged in a minute. . . . Young Millington's check eh?"

"My dividend on a deal we had together," Lathrop remarked. To himself, he added: "My first lie! I wonder, where will my lies end!"

"Do you wish to draw anything now?" the president inquired.

"Well, yes, I think perhaps I had better take a couple of hundreds," Lathrop replied, negligently. "And a pocket check-book, please."

As he continued on his way down-town, a curious change in mood was wrought by the knowledge that there were dollars in his pocket. A little earlier, he had re-

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gretted the necessity for walking; now, he walked by preference when he might have ridden. And, too, as he strode onward, he began to feel a strange elation, born of the consciousness of power—a sensation wholly unknown to him hitherto. Its origin lay in the fact that, for the first time in his life, he had become an active agent in human affairs.

“Why, I am going into business,” he reflected, with a smile of self-derision, yet with a feeling of pride. “Of course, it is beginning the thing with rather a black eye, but it is a beginning, none the less.”

Unhappily for him, however, this mood was of the most transitory. Soon, he was in the depths of self-loathing, nor could he again cajole himself into lightheartedness. The implacable truth confronted him constantly: He had taken an irreparable step downward; he was a thief!

He went first to the Westmoreland Safe-Deposit Company's vaults, and, hav-

THE REWARD OF VILLAINY

ing presented his letter to the superintendent, took the documents he wanted from the safe, and performed the several duties which Millington had regarded as most important. Then, having filled out the two of the blank checks with amounts taken from the memoranda of the brokers upon whom he called to settle yesterday's accounts for his friend, the legitimate work of the day was done. The only remaining commission that he had to fulfill was the contemplated attack upon Cummings, and this could not begin for a day or two yet.

It was now two o'clock, and he directed his steps toward the office of George Trevor. He found the financier seated at his desk, apparently as calm as ever, but the lines of care and the look of anxiety had deepened even since their interview.

"Ah, Morris," he exclaimed, "I'm glad you have come. Close the door. I'm afraid it's all over with me."

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"How is that, pater?" Lathrop asked.

"I must have that matter arranged before the bank opens to-morrow morning."

The old man's voice trembled as he spoke.

"Well, that's all right," Morris announced placidly. "I could have brought it with me."

"You could?" Trevor cried the question hoarsely.

"Certainly."

"Good God!"

The old broker leaned back in his chair, and his face became very white. Then Morris, as he watched, saw tears gathering in the corners of his friend's eyes. But, presently, the whole manner of the man changed.

"What time is it?" he demanded, suddenly.

"Three minutes past two," Lathrop replied, after glancing at his watch.

"Would you have to go far?" was the next question.

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"For the securities? No, not very far."

"Could you go for them, and get back here before three?" Trevor inquired. He was leaning forward now, in trembling eagerness.

"Why, yes, I think so," Lathrop answered. "Indeed, I am sure I could make it."

"Then try it, my boy," the financier exclaimed. "Take my carriage—it's at the door of the building. Quick! There's not a moment to lose!"

Forthwith, Morris obediently hurried from the office, leaped into the carriage, and was soon driving rapidly again toward the Westmoreland Safe-deposit vaults. But, now, he intended to make immediate use of that third key which Millington had hoped he might not need at all. The memoranda in his pocketbook told him what to select, so that his task was wonderfully simple. As he stood before the open door of the safe, he could

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not but wonder at the confidence reposed in him by his friend in giving him the open sesame for such wealth, for what he had abstracted did not represent a tenth part of the contents of the repository. And then he smiled to himself. Twenty-four hours earlier in his career, he would not have thought the confidence strange or unusual, since he would not have thought of abusing it. It was only another version of the old saw that a guilty conscience is its own accuser.

"It is done. I, Morris Lathrop, am a thief." He laughed aloud as he uttered the words, while the carriage was whirling back again toward the office of George Trevor. The old man was awaiting him, and Lathrop threw the bundle of securities on the table.

"There, pater," he said, "figure it up for yourself. I hope there's enough. If there isn't, I can get more."

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"Enough!" exclaimed the broker, after ten minutes of busy silence. "Why, the most conservative figures make it upward of \$755,000. It's more than I need—much more!"

"I thought you said you wanted half-a-million," Lathrop exclaimed.

"So I did—in securities; about three hundred thousand in cash. Why, boy, this is gilt-edged collateral. The bank will credit me with almost the full value of this."

"So much the better," Lathrop suggested, smiling. "It won't do any harm to have a little extra for a nest-egg."

"Do you mean that I shall use all of it?" the financier questioned, eagerly.

"Certainly; that is what I brought it here for."

The old man looked at Lathrop for a moment; then, without a word, he sank down upon his chair, and sobbed aloud.

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The terrible strain was past, and he gave way under the reaction as he would not have done had he lost everything.

"Come, come, pater, none of that," cried Lathrop, brokenly. "And see: it is a quarter of three!"

"God bless you, Morris! God bless you!" Trevor said, softly. "Wait here for me. I shall return very soon."

"I'm afraid the other fellow wouldn't say, 'God bless you!' to me, if he were here," muttered Lathrop when he was alone. He walked to the window, and looked out upon the passing throng, wondering vaguely as he watched that web of men shuttling to and fro if they were all thieves like himself.

Trevor returned presently. His face was beaming, and he rubbed his hands contentedly together.

"It's all right," he said. "I'm not afraid of the whole Street, now. The bank did an unprecedented thing: credited

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me with the full amount. What do you think of that?"

"I think the bank ought to have done it," was the prompt answer.

"Oh, you do! Eh?" the elder man said, with a chuckle of enjoyment. "Well, sir, let me tell you that the banks are not run as charitable institutions."

Then, in a moment, his face grew grave, as he drew forth a formidable-appearing document.

"Glance over this, please," he requested, extending the paper to his companion.

"Why, what is this?" Lathrop inquired, in astonishment. He had, in fact, quite forgotten the financier's stipulation that he should be rewarded for his services in this emergency by a place in the firm of George Trevor & Company.

"That," the banker replied, "is an agreement of partnership between us, which I have caused to be prepared. It is dated thirty days back, in order that your part

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in to-day's business should not be too apparent." He thrust a pen into Lathrop's hand. "Sign there," he directed, with a gesture.

And, dazed by the unexpectedness of the event, Morris Lathrop wrote his name in the indicated place, as he had been commanded.

CHAPTER V

A MEETING OF MAIDENS

LATHROP stared thoughtfully at the document in his hand, which he had signed automatically at the bidding of the financier.

"Pater," he said presently, "I don't think that you should do this thing—make me a partner in your firm."

"Why not, sir?" came the crisp inquiry.

"Well, there are many reasons," the young man answered hesitatingly. "The principal one—and it is sufficient—is that I am by no means fit."

"That is my concern," Trevor declared, "and I am quite content. Why, my dear Morris, do you realize what you have done for me to-day? You have saved my life! I should never have survived it, had I gone

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to the wall. In addition to that, you have saved my fortune, and Edna's and Carla's. What is far more than all the rest: you have saved my honor. I shall never forget that. The half of this business is small recompense for such service. . . ."

The broker paused for a moment to control his emotion. Then, he continued in a changed voice: "In a week or so, I shall be able to return your securities to you, Morris. By the way, that reminds me: Those securities! Where in the world did you get hold of them?"

Lathrop started slightly, but gave no other sign of his agitation at the question.

"Why do you ask that?" he inquired, lazily.

The financier smiled complacently.

"Oh, it is nothing much," he said; "only that it happens to be the best joke of the season! There are men on the Street at this moment who would give a fortune to know that you are in possession of this

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particular stock. Of course, Sam Millington must know that you have it.

"You see, Morris," he resumed, presently, "this is the fact of the matter: Sam Millington has been my enemy time out of mind; it was his influence that was pushing me to the wall in this present case when I appealed to you for help. And now, at the psychological moment, you bring me this block of stock which everybody believes him to have locked up in one of his safe-deposit vaults. If he had ever guessed the possibility of such a use for it, he would have burned it. I never dreamed of such a thing as that Millington should let that stock go. You are cleverer than I thought you, Morris. On my word, you'll make a capital partner!"

"Oh, that brings me back to what I was saying," Lathrop exclaimed. "Really, sir, this partnership affair should not be carried on."

"But I insist on it," the financier cried,

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hotly. "Besides, my boy, you have signed, so that the thing is settled. And, Morris," he added, gently, "I want you here with me."

"You said that the agreement was dated thirty days back?" Lathrop asked, reflectively.

"Yes."

"Very well, then," the young man conceded, after a short pause. "Let things go on as they now are for a month longer. If, at the end of that time, you are still anxious to have me here with you, I shall be very, very glad to come, sir."

"Very well," Trevor agreed. "And now come with me. I'll drive you to the club. Afterward, you must go home to dinner with me."

"Not to-night, pater," Lathrop said. "I'll ride with you as far as the club, but I must leave you there. I have something of importance that I must attend to before the day is done. I had formed plans

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yesterday which were upset by our conversation last night. I wrote a letter concerning them to a very dear friend of mine, and I fear that I may have caused unnecessary pain. So, I must straighten the matter out, without a minute of needless delay."

Both men were silent during the drive, and, soon after entering the club, they separated. Lathrop was absorbed in thinking of that complication which he had forgotten throughout the day. In consequence, he did not linger long at the club, but hurried off to his apartment.

As he entered the elevator, he was met by the announcement:

"There is a lady waiting for you, sir."

"A lady?" Lathrop repeated, in some perplexity.

"She came early this afternoon, sir," the attendant answered. "She was in the reception-room for a long time. It is the same one who was here once before, so I

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took the liberty of admitting her to your parlor. She said she must wait until you came. I hope I did right, sir."

"Oh, certainly," Lathrop replied. He spoke quietly, but he was excessively annoyed nevertheless, and showed it by the impatient haste of his stride as he advanced along the passage to the door of his suite. This stood wide open, and, through it, in a far corner, he perceived the form of a woman, half-buried within a huge chair.

The visitor sprang up as he entered the room, and ran toward him with both hands eagerly outstretched in welcome. There were tears in her eyes; her face was flushed with the deep emotion of the moment. And that face was tender, sweet, pathetic, wistful. It was very beautiful, as well, with the dark loveliness of the Spanish woman. The perfectly-fitting tailored suit she wore showed to advantage the curving liteness of her slender body.

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"Oh, Morris! Morris! You have returned. Thank heaven!" she cried fervently, in a soft, rich voice, musically vibrant. She drooped to Lathrop's breast, and gave way to a passion of weeping.

He waited patiently until the paroxysm was past; then he led her back to the chair which she had vacated.

"There! there, 'Rita!" he said soothingly, as to a child. "I have changed my mind since I wrote you that letter yesterday. I should have been up to see you within the half-hour. How long have you been here?"

"Oh, since ten o'clock this morning," the girl answered, plaintively. "I received your letter at that time, and so, of course, I came at once. Oh, Morris, you are not going away as you said in the letter?"

"No, dear, I am not going away," Lathrop assured her; "at least, not at present—not for two weeks I think, any-

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way. But you should not have come here, 'Rita. I told you that when you came before."

"I could not help it; indeed, I could not," the girl pleaded, tremulously. "Your letter was so strange, Morris, that it frightened me. It made me think that I might never see you again, and I should have died if that were true. You will not go away without coming to bid me good-bye, will you? Ever? Promise me that, Morris!"

"Yes, I promise, if in return you will promise never to come here again, under any circumstance—that is, alone. I don't suppose you have had any luncheon, have you?" he demanded.

"No, nor breakfast either. I came at once when I received the letter."

"Poor child, you must be starved!" Lathrop exclaimed. "Come, we will go at once."

"Where were you going, Morris?" the

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girl asked, as he buttoned her coat around her. The clouds had all disappeared, and now sunshine sparkled in her eyes and upon her face.

"Well," he replied somewhat grimly, "I am not exactly certain where I was going. The route that I had selected might have taken me to either of two destinations, but I am in some doubt as to which one would have fitted me the better. . . . Are you ready?"

He turned toward the door. His hand was upon the knob, when there came a sudden and sharp rap upon the panels.

"Step into the next room, 'Rita,'" Lathrop directed, in a low tone. Then, after giving her time to obey, he threw open the door, and immediately uttered an involuntary ejaculation of astonishment, for at the threshold stood Edna Trevor.

"May I come in, Morris?" she demanded, brightly, with a mischievous smile

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at her own audacity in this expedition. Without waiting for her host's permission, she stepped past him into the room, and paused in the centre of it, devouring with eager eyes the decorated walls, the bric-à-brac, the curios—everything, while Lathrop, excessively annoyed, stood in silence, regarding her with frowning brows.

“It's lovely—just lovely!” the girl exclaimed presently, with enthusiasm. “I never saw a bachelor-apartment before, you know, and I have so wanted to! Pipes and swords and armor and shields! . . . I was going by, and the temptation to run in was too great for my powers of resistance. So, here I am! Aren't you going to give me some tea, Morris?”

“I am very sorry, but I haven't time to do that,” Lathrop replied, rather coldly. “I was on the point of going out when you came.”

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"Oh, you were!" Edna exclaimed, with a pout of disappointment. Then, in an instant, her manner changed. "What is that?" she cried, sharply. She had been moving about the room inquisitively while speaking; now, she stopped short and picked up something from the floor. It was a dainty, wine-colored glove—a tiny thing, much too small even for her own shapely hand. She held it between her fingers disdainfully for a moment; then, she turned slowly toward Lathrop.

"Whose glove is this? Where did it come from?" she demanded.

"I found it in the elevator," Lathrop lied, glibly.

"Nonsense, Morris!" Edna retorted, with manifest contempt. "If you had found it there, you would have left it to be claimed. There has been someone here. Ah, there was someone here when I came. She is here now. Yes, I can smell her, I know I can."

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"You can—what?" Lathrop cried, aghast.

"I can smell her," Edna repeated, no whit dismayed. "Yes, violet perfume. Morris Lathrop," she continued sternly, "have you a woman concealed in your apartments?"

As the young man maintained a sullen silence before the question, she darted a last angry glance at him, then started toward the door. Before she had taken three steps, she was arrested by the appearance, from the room beyond, of the other visitor, whose cheeks were flushed with excitement and anger.

"You have guessed rightly, señorita," the new-comer said haughtily. "I am here."

For a brief space, the two women stood facing each other, the one defiant, the other speechless with indignant amazement. Finally, Lathrop deemed it wiser to interfere, and he went forward.

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"Miss Trevor," he said, "permit me to introduce to you Señorita Ortega. Clarita, this is Miss Edna Trevor. You have heard me speak of her."

Clarita bowed coldly. But Edna drew herself stiffly erect, and turned away without a sign of recognition. As she faced Lathrop, she addressed him in a voice of wrath.

"How dare you!" she exclaimed. "How dare you introduce such a person to me!" And, forthwith, she swept past him, opened the door, passed out, closed it behind her, and was gone.

CHAPTER VI

JACK MILLINGTON'S RETURN

“**W**HAT did she mean by calling me ‘such a person?’” Clarita questioned, when the door was shut behind the departing visitor.

“I wouldn’t bother about that now, ‘Rita,” Lathrop urged, wearily. “Come; if you are ready, let us go, please.”

“Did she mean to imply that I had no right to be here?” the girl persisted.

“Probably. For that matter, neither had she any right to come here, so the matter is even between you. But do come now.”

“Wait,” Clarita entreated. “Tell me: Is she the lady to whom you are engaged?”

“No,” Lathrop replied; “her sister.”

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"What is the name of that sister whom you are to marry?" was the next question.

The discomfited young man sighed fretfully, as he answered:

"Carla."

"And this one is Edna," his tormentor mused.

"Yes, this is Edna," Lathrop agreed, impatiently.

"Will she tell her sister that I was here, concealed in your rooms?" Clarita asked, after a meditative pause.

"Oh, no; I think not—that is, I don't know—I hope not!" There was embarrassment in Lathrop's voice, and a trace of anxiety in his expression.

"Is this Carla—I hate the name—is she jealous? Will she care if Edna tells her that I was here, do you think?"

"What nonsense are you conjuring up now, 'Rita?" Lathrop exclaimed sharply, for he was greatly annoyed. "There is no occasion for any jealousy."

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The girl went close to him, and took one of his hands in hers. Then, raising it to her lips, she kissed it gently.

"I think that, were I in her place, I should be jealous," she said. As she spoke, she cast on him a gaze so filled with adoration it seemed impossible that he could fail to perceive it. "And," Clarita continued, "this Edna will tell her. I am sure: I saw it in her eyes. She hates me—oh, yes! I think that she loves you, Morris."

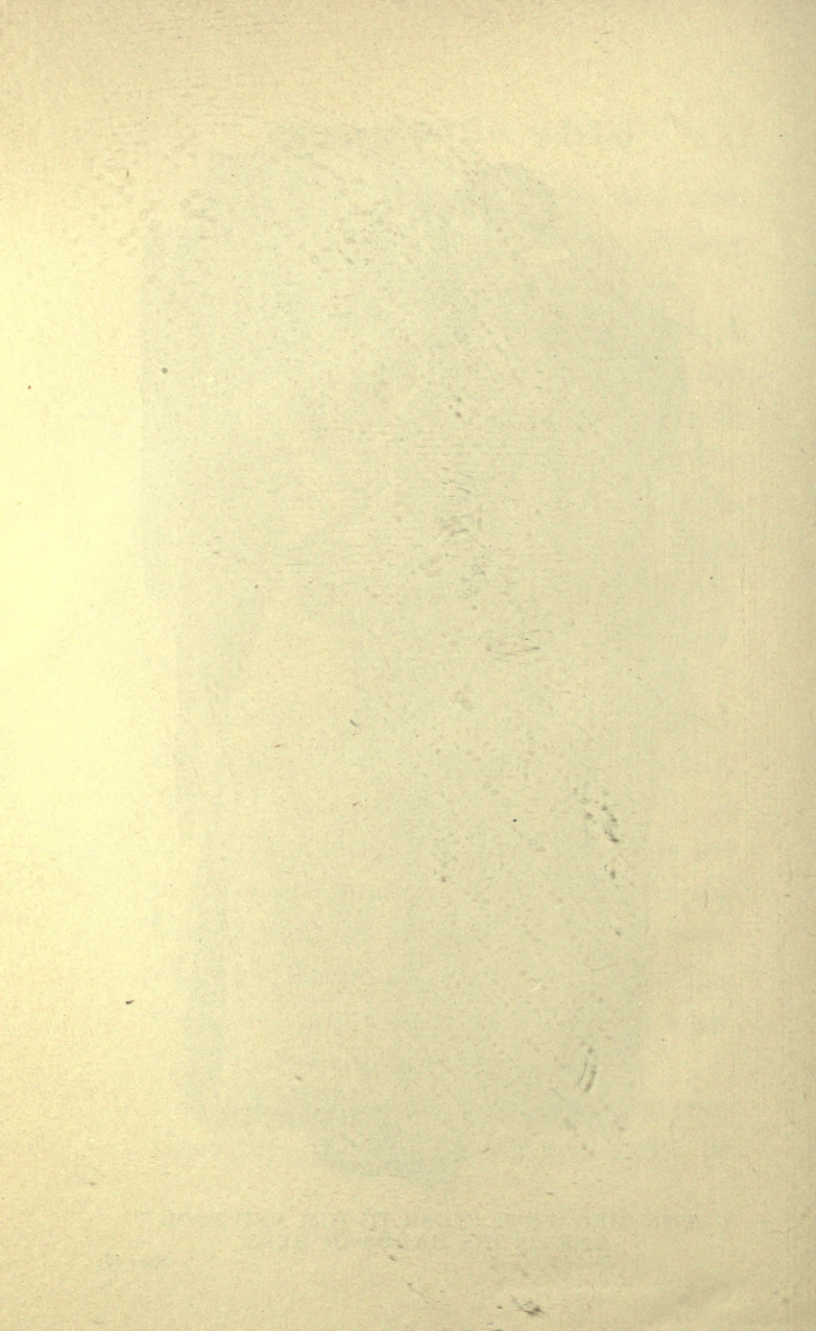
"What! Edna?" Lathrop ejaculated, flushing. "That is nonsense. Really, Rita, you are absurd."

"Well, I think that it is true," was the unperturbed answer. "Perhaps, even she herself did not know it until just now, when she found me here. But I believe that she knows it now. That is what made her so angry. She is jealous."

Lathrop realized that any effort to convince the girl against her will must be



THE GIRL WENT CLOSE TO HIM AND TOOK
ONE OF HIS HANDS IN hers.



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futile at this time; therefore, he made no rejoinder, but led the way to the door in silence. He was too much a man of the world not to know that his two visitors were, in a measure, compromised by the incident which had taken place, but he depended on the loyalty of Edna to keep the matter secret until he should have opportunity for adequate explanation of the situation. He regretted bitterly now that he had requested Clarita to conceal herself in the adjoining room. The thing was done, however, and there remained only to make the best of an extremely unfortunate occurrence.

"You will spend the evening with me, Morris?" Clarita questioned as, an hour later, they went out of the restaurant.

Lathrop did not reply until the cab to which he signaled had drawn up by the curb.

"No, not to-night, 'Rita," he said then. "I must—"

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“—hasten to Carla, I suppose,” the girl interrupted, petulantly. “Is it so?”

“No, dear,” Lathrop replied. “I—” He broke off to say good-evening to Chapman, who passed at this moment. Then, he spoke to the girl again: “I’ll come to-morrow evening, if you like; but to-night it is impossible.”

He put her into the hansom. Afterward, as it drove away, he turned to Chapman, who stood near by, awaiting him.

“Step inside for a moment, Chapman,” he said. “I wish to give you a check for that I. O. U.”

“Oh, never mind now,” the other protested.

“You’ll be at the club to-night, won’t you?”

Lathrop made no reply as he led Chapman into the vestibule. But, after the check had been filled out and delivered, he said:

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"No, I shall not go to the club to-night."

"Ah, a date, I suppose," Chapman exclaimed, banteringly. "I say, old man, who was the charmer? You seem to be on pretty good terms with her. I heard you call her 'dear.'"

Lathrop raised his eyes until he encountered those of his club acquaintance. For a long moment, he stared full at the fellow; then, he deliberately turned his back, and walked away without another word. But Chapman hastened to follow.

"Here, Lathrop, old boy!" he called. "I apologize, you know."

Lathrop turned, with a look of contempt.

"Mr. Chapman," he said, "an apology for a slight or for a mistake is good. But it seems to me that bad taste, such as you have shown, is its own apology. Good-night."

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'As he continued on his way, he was far from realizing the bitterness of the enmity which he had provoked by those few words. If he had known the truth, he would have recked little of the fact. Yet, that incident, so insignificant, seemingly, was vital in the history of Morris Lathrop.

Chapman stood for a minute as one stunned by the scathing rebuke. Through the first few seconds, he was hard put to it lest he hurl himself on Lathrop. But, in the end, he mastered the first fierceness of his emotion. He was on the point of resuming his walk, when by chance, he raised his eyes, and saw, just turning the corner into Fifth avenue, the cab in which was the young lady who had been the innocent cause of his humiliation; a block at the corner had delayed its progress hitherto. Instantly, his resolve was taken. 'A hansom was near at hand, awaiting a

JACK MILLINGTON'S RETURN

fare. He hurried to this, and addressed the driver.

"You see that cab just at the corner there," he said swiftly, with a gesture.

"Yes, sir," the cabman replied.

"Well," Chapman continued as he sprang into the hansom, "I want you to keep it in sight. Double fare. But be careful not to get too close."

As he sank down on the seat, the driver cracked his whip, and the pursuit began.

As for Lathrop, he made his way directly to the Trevor mansion, where he rang the bell, and, when the butler appeared, penciled a few words on a card, which he sent up to Edna. Five minutes later she confronted him in the drawing-room.

"It was my first impulse," she said, before he could speak, "to send down word that I would not see you, but I knew that,

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if I did, you would come again. Of course, I cannot forbid you the house, but I can and do refuse to receive you myself. You need not try to explain. I would not believe you if you did, so it is useless."

Lathrop, half-amused, half-angry, said the most unfortunate thing that he could have uttered.

"You talk like a foolish little girl, Edna," he said, smiling.

Edna's wrath was at white heat on the instant, but it found expression in half-subdued contempt.

"I will not quarrel with you," she declared, tensely, "but I will say this: I have not told Carla. That, of course, is what you came to beg of me not to do. I have not told her, but I intend to do so as soon as I know who that woman is, and I have already taken measures to find out. I saw you leave the house. I myself followed you to the restaurant. And, I found somebody there who agreed to

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follow her, and to learn all about her, and it will be done." Edna turned then, and, without heeding his call to her, rushed from the room.

Thus it happened that there were two sleuths on the track of Clarita Ortega that night.

Lathrop, after the girl's departure, shrugged his shoulders, and pulled viciously at his moustache, while one foot tapped impatiently on the carpet. Then, with a disconsolate shake of the head, he went out of the drawing-room, and along the hall to the library, where he opened the door, and stepped within the room.

The instant his foot was across the threshold, he paused in sudden consternation, shaken by the knowledge that his sins had found him out. In that moment, he would have given everything in the world, his own life included, could he but have undone the events of the last twenty-four hours. For, standing there in the centre

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of the room facing him, as if expectant of his coming, was the man whom he had believed to be in Chicago—Jack Millington!

CHAPTER VII

A MILLIONAIRE'S PROMISE

IT has been said that when a man faces what he believes to be inevitable death, the events of his entire life, no matter how long it has been, nor how filled with incident, pass in review before him in an infinitesimal space of time. Certainly, every detail connected with Lathrop's experience during the previous twenty-four hours was prominently in his recollection in that one instant when he saw and recognized Millington, in the library of George Trevor. His face, however, betrayed none of the emotion he felt. It had been set to sternness when he opened the door, as a result of the interview he had just had with Edna, and now its expression did not change. But his perceptions were sharp-

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ened by the sudden encounter, and the eager start forward which Millington made told him that nothing had been discovered as yet, although he could in no way account for the young man's presence in this place.

Millington stepped to him quickly, and thrust out his hand.

"Morris," he said eagerly, "you are a friend in need. You have come in the nick of time."

"I'm glad of that," Lathrop declared with great cordiality. "But I thought you were in Chicago, or very near it, by this hour."

"So I intended to be," was the answer; "so I should have been, but for a telegram which headed me off and turned me back at Utica. I've just got in town, and came directly here. Sit down. There is no privacy about this interview—that is, none so far as you are concerned."

"It must be something important to

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bring you back, in the face of the orders you received from the governor," Lathrop hazarded.

"It is," Millington declared, emphatically. "I came back just to see Trevor. I might as well have gone on, for I can't do a thing with him!"

"What's the trouble, pater?" asked Lathrop, turning his eyes upon the financier.

The old man smiled grimly.

"No trouble at all," he replied. "The trouble is all past—for me; it is just beginning for a few others—your friend here, for instance."

"I don't mind telling you," interrupted Millington, "although it does not redound to my credit. Still"—and he turned to Trevor—"it is really the governor you must blame, not me. It's this way," he continued, addressing Lathrop. "Trevor is concerned in a deal which is immense; he ought to make millions out of it; he has

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organized a syndicate to control the output of copper for the entire world—that is, to control the market, which is the same thing. The governor, through his friends here, has been working to break him, and they—or shall I say we, Mr. Trevor?”

“It would be nearer the truth,” came the uncompromising reply.

“Very well—although it is not the truth!—we thought we had him. We figured very closely, on just how far he could go, and we meant to break him. That’s the unvarnished truth. We looked up every security he held; or rather, we thought we did. Then, at the very moment when he is, as we believe, on the point of failure, lo! he bobs up with another million or two, and we’re out in the cold. Now, I’ve returned to try to induce him to take me into the deal. I’ve made him a handsome offer. He won’t deny that. Will you, Trevor?”

“No; not at all,” the financier agreed.

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"But he refuses—says, if I had come the day before yesterday, or yesterday even, he would have jumped at the chance; now, it's too late. I've offered to place a million dollars to his credit at once, and to stand ready to back him for five more at the drop of the hat. He'll need it, too, before he is through with this deal, and he knows it, although he doesn't know what I know. Now, Morris, I want you to help me persuade him."

"Is this your affair, Jack, or your father's?" Lathrop asked.

"Mine," Millington made answer, vigorously.

"Your father has nothing to do with it? And he won't have?"

"No, I tell you. I'm alone—absolutely. Why, as to that, of course I want a share in the profits; but, chiefly, I want to steal a march on the governor."

Lathrop turned to Trevor.

"If you should give Jack the chance he

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wants," he questioned, "would it affect your profits in the matter?"

"It wouldn't make them any less;" the old man admitted. "It might make them greater, even. If he had come to me when I was in need of him—that is, when he thought I was—I'd have accepted. Now, I won't!"

"When do you start for Chicago again, Jack?" Lathrop inquired, calmly changing the subject, to the evident relief of Trevor, and to the surprise of Millington.

"On the midnight—it's ten, now."

"Shall we stroll up to the club first?"

"Yes, if you like. Shall we go at once, Morris? I'm very sorry over your decision, Trevor. If you change your mind, wire me. I'll be at the Chicago Club. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir," the financier replied, without geniality.

"Good-night, pater," Lathrop said,

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with an affectionate smile. "I'll see you early to-morrow."

Then, the two younger men went out of the house together, and strolled up the avenue. Lathrop felt a peculiar elation because of the interview that had just taken place, for it assured him that Millington had discovered nothing, and that George Trevor had not mentioned the nature of the securities he had deposited that day, and, too, he thought that he now saw a way out of his dilemma, for the partnership agreement was in his pocket, and he was positive that he could induce Trevor to accept the aid of the young financier. This done, surely he could so direct matters that there need be no fear lest his crime be exposed.

Unfortunately, he forgot that it was not Jack Millington, but the father who owned the stolen securities. The reckoning, if reckoning there were, must be with

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the elder Millington, not with the younger. Later on, this fact was to be borne in on him with crushing force.

"Jack," he said, as they were walking along together, "you have come about as near making an ass of yourself as your own father could wish."

"Eh? How is that?" was the astonished and indignant query.

"Well, then," Lathrop demanded, "will you tell me why you didn't ask me last night to do this thing for you?"

"Why, because I didn't think of it," Millington answered.

"But, if you had thought of it," Lathrop asserted, "you would not have asked me."

"Perhaps not," his friend admitted. "Besides," he added naively, "we thought that we had him. But anyhow, you can persuade him, Morris, if you want to. I saw the old man look at you as though he feared that you might insist on his taking

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me in. I am sure that, if you had insisted, he would have done it."

"Well, to tell you the truth," Lathrop said thoughtfully, "I think that I can accomplish it for you. I shall undertake to do it while you are away. Now, how can I get hold of the million which you promised him, if he should wish to take it? According to my memoranda, there is not that much in your own particular strong-box at the Westmoreland."

"My dear fellow," Millington cried, jovially, "you haven't the keys to all my strong-boxes, as you call them. There are others! If the thing comes to a head, wire me the one word, "Correct." Within a couple of hours, you will have the money delivered to you. . . . And let me add, Morris: if you can do this thing for me, there is nothing I will not do for you, in return."

At this statement from the friend whom he had betrayed, Lathrop's heart jumped.

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There was a note of solemnity in his voice when he spoke again:

“Jack,” he said softly, “that is a promise of which, sometime, I may remind you!”

In the billiard room of the club, they encountered Chapman, who nodded to Millington, but passed Lathrop without a glance.

“What is the matter between you two?” Millington asked, curiously.

“Nothing; only I discovered that Chapman is a cad—and I told him of it.”

“Humph!” was his friend’s comment. “Well, in my opinion, he is a dangerous one. He’s sly, that fellow. He’d knife you in the back in a minute, if nobody was looking.”

The two were soon busily engaged in a game, neither paying the slightest attention to those at the adjoining table, until the loud tones of Chapman, who was

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evidently telling an interesting story, became insistently distinct.

“— Prettiest girl in New York,” he was saying. “I didn’t suppose Lathrop had such good taste. And, by the same token, one would suppose that she would have had better. A regular little Spanish beauty, with big, black eyes and luscious lips—ah!”

Morris Lathrop had placed his cue on the table, and he now stood transfixed, his face as white as the ball he had been knocking about. Those who were listening to the story eyed him uneasily, but Chapman stood with back toward him, talking on in the same loud voice, as though unaware of the presence of the man whose affairs he was discussing.

“You’d have been amused to witness his indignation when I asked him who the charmer was,” he continued. “He gave me the stony glare like a tragedian, and walked away in a huff. However, I stole

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a march on him, for I followed her and found out who she was, where she lived and all about her. Then, I waited a while, and sent up my card."

"Did she receive you?" somebody who had not noticed Lathrop, inquired.

"Indeed, she did! I wrote on the back of the card, 'A friend of Morris's,' and she had me up at once. I tell you, it's a smart establishment. Nothing is too good for that Seventy-ninth street apartment, and, if the señorita was beautiful on the street, she was adorable at home.

"'Did Morris send you?' she asked. I was a bit puzzled at that; but, finally I made a clean breast of the matter, and said, 'No.' I confessed that I had seen her with him, and that I could not resist the temptation to follow her home. You ought to have seen her eyes blaze then. She—"

He ceased suddenly, for Morris Lath-

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rop stood before him, his face white and set, his eyes glittering dangerously.

• “Go on,” Lathrop said, quietly. “What did she do then? Relate your scoundrelism to the end. What did she do then?”

Chapman laughed boisterously, but the laughter was forced.

“I didn’t know that you were here,” he sneered, “or I might have kept the story till later.”

“Finish it now,” the other commanded.

“Well, if you will have it, she kissed me—”

He got no further. Lathrop took one step forward, his fist shot out; Chapman, smitten on the point of his chin, went down upon the floor, several feet away, and lay there, quivering.

Lathrop turned away, wiped his hands upon his handkerchief, donned his coat, and without a glance at the still senseless

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Chapman, whom nobody had approached, faced the members of the club who were in the billiard room.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “my resignation from this club dates from to-night. I regret that I was compelled to break an inviolate rule. Come, Jack; let’s go.”

CHAPTER VIII

CLARITA ORTEGA AT HOME

“**J**ACK,” Lathrop said, when the two friends reached the street, “you have an hour and a half, or a little more before your train goes. I want you to go to Seventy-ninth street with me. Will you do it?”

“Certainly; but why do you want me?”

“I want to show you the woman whom Chapman insulted. If ever there was a soul without guile, here is one. I want you to know it. It is necessary, now, that somebody besides myself should know about her.”

He had hailed a cab while they were talking, and they got in and were driven away.

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"Isn't it rather late to make a call, Morris?" asked Millington, presently.

"No; I often go as late as this. Jack, if that scoundrel ever refers to her again, I'll kill him. I felt like it to-night."

"You looked like it, certainly," Millington declared. "Jove! I didn't know you could be such a demon, old man."

"I know it only too well," was Lathrop's moody rejoinder. "I am more afraid of myself than of any man living. I inherit strength and a horrible temper, which, until to-night, I thought I had learned to subdue. When I lose it, a devil possesses me."

Nothing more was said until they stood together in front of the house, where Lathrop opened the vestibule door with a key, and gave the electric button inside a series of regulated touches. The inner door swung open instantly, and they passed inside to the stairway, mounted

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one flight, and found Clarita awaiting them at the head of the stairs.

If she felt surprised when she discovered that Morris was not alone, she said nothing of it, but quietly led the way into the parlor, which was brilliantly lighted.

"'Rita," said Lathrop, "this gentleman is one of my most trusted friends, Mr. Millington. Jack, let me present you to Miss Ortega."

Then, for an instant he stared at his friend in astonishment, inasmuch as Millington became suddenly as awkward as an uncouth boy. For some moments after the introduction was uttered, he did not move. Finally, however, he bowed and extended his hand. His face was as red as a peony.

"I beg your pardon," he said, confusedly. "I—I think I was—er—surprised!" Then, he became silent again, still staring,

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nor did he regain his composure until after they had left the house.

"Has a man named Chapman been here to-night, 'Rita?" Lathrop asked at once, thus relieving the strain and permitting Millington to drop into a chair, where he continued to stare, though evidently making a heroic effort not to do so.

"Yes, oh, yes;" was the impetuous answer, "and another man, too. What does it mean? Are you in trouble, Morris?"

"I in trouble? No. Another man, you say? Who—ah!" He recalled, then, what Edna had said to him. "Tell me about both of them," he continued.

The girl tapped one of her little feet impatiently on the carpet while she replied to him, and it was plain that she was still angry.

"The first one—the one whom you call Chapman—came soon after I arrived home. He sent up a card by the hall boy, and he had written upon it that he came

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from you. I thought it strange; but, of course, I admitted him. Then—ah! I cannot tell you!—he was insulting. Marie was out—I was alone. I ordered him to leave the house, but he would not. He tried to seize me—he meant to—to—kiss me—he said so! I fled into the other room, and locked the door. He rapped upon it, but I did not answer, and then, after a few moments, he went away, laughing.”

Millington bounded from his chair, and strode up and down the room.

“The scoundrel! The infernal scoundrel!” he muttered. “I’ll settle with him!”

“That is already done, in part,” Lathrop said, quietly. “Now, ’Rita, the other man; tell me about him.”

“Oh, the other!” the girl exclaimed. “He came soon after the first one had gone. The boy brought up word that the man wished to speak with me. He sent

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no name. I said that I would see nobody, and that he was not to admit anyone, or to bring any more messages to me. Afterward, I called to him and asked him if it was the same man who came the first time, and he said no, it was not. That is all. Who is that Mr. Chapman? Surely he is no friend of yours, Morris!"

"Certainly not!" Lathrop declared. "But I am afraid, little girl, that you will have to move again. I am sorry, but it is necessary, 'Rita."

"I like this place so much!" she sighed.

"I know, dear, but there are others just as good," Lathrop urged. "I'll find one in the morning and—"

"Look here, Morris," his friend interrupted. "I've got just the thing for you—just what you want; it's in the Millington—that's on Central Park West, Miss Ortega, and it belongs to me. The pleasantest apartment in the whole house—on the top floor, you know—is vacant. You

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shall have it. Here! I'll write the order now."

He took out his note-book, dashed off the order and passed it to Lathrop. Then, he looked at his watch, and sprang to his feet, exclaiming:

"I must go, if I'm to catch that train. Good-night, Miss Ortega. I hope that Morris will let me come again some time." And he hurried to the door, followed in more leisurely fashion by his friend.

The ride down-town was a silent affair, and they were nearly at the station before either spoke to the other. Then, Millington, with marked hesitation, said:

"Some day, old man, when you feel like it, will you tell me something about Miss Ortega?"

"Yes," Lathrop answered, simply.

There was silence again until the cab turned into Forty-second street and was nearing the station, when Millington spoke again.

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"I thought you were going to marry one of Trevor's daughters," he said.

"I am," was the reply.

Millington made no comment, but, after a little interval, changed the subject:

"By the way," he said, "I hadn't remembered to ask you: Did you attend to those matters for me to-day?"

"Every one of them," Lathrop declared. Then, as the cab halted, and Millington got out, he extended his hand. "Good luck to you," he added. "And, Jack, I'd like to give you a bit of advice."

"What is it?"

"Don't think too much about Clarita Ortega while you are away. She is not for you, unless—"

"Well, unless what?" Millington demanded eagerly as Lathrop hesitated.

"I'll complete that sentence when you return," was the unsatisfactory answer.

"Good-night."

They clasped hands and parted, one to

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run for his train, having barely time to get through the door before it was closed, and the other to ride on with bowed head and scowling brow, disgusted with himself for what he had done that day, harassed, troubled, contemptuous, but, nevertheless, inflexible in his resolution to play his scoundrel's game to the end.

"If I had carried out my resolve to kill myself," he mused, "I should have died with a conscience as untroubled as the surface of a woodland spring. Now, if I lived a thousand years, I should never regain what I have lost—my self-respect. I may live to square myself with others: I can never square myself with myself. The world may not know what I have done, but I know it, and that is infinitely worse!"

CHAPTER IX

THE HAND THAT STABS

IN the week that followed, Lathrop did not once call at the 'Trevors', although he spent a portion of his time daily in the office of the financier. He could not bring himself to go to the house, for he felt that he could not look into the clear, earnest eyes of Carla Trevor without revealing within his own the guilt which weighed down his spirit. Moreover, he had been very busy. The plot hatched in the early hours of the morning when Jack Millington was called to Chicago, was beginning to unfold itself, and now Lathrop discovered, to his vast astonishment, that he possessed a real aptitude for business. A genuine zest for it thrilled in his blood: his brain grappled easily with all the prob-

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lems offered, and mastered them. Cummings had snapped at the bait thrown out to him, and had swallowed it greedily, so that it was now but a matter of days ere the forecast made by Millington would become a fact. Yet, despite his devotion to the manœuvres in behalf of his friend, Lathrop's mind held continually in its recesses the hateful consciousness of his infamy in the matter of the stolen securities. His one dominant anxiety was to regain possession of these, in order that they might be replaced in the vaults of the safe-deposit company before the return of Millington.

Then, one morning, he received a note from Carla Trevor, in which she requested him to call on her that afternoon, at four o'clock. At exactly that hour, he was ushered into the drawing-room of the financier's mansion. There, standing in the centre of the room, awaiting him, was Edna.

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"Smith," she said composedly to the butler, "you need not take Mr. Lathrop's card to Miss Trevor just yet. I wish to talk with him for a few moments before my sister comes down."

"Why, Edna," Lathrop said, with an air of raillery before the servant, "you seem very much the woman of business this afternoon." Then, when the butler had left the room, he continued curiously:

"How did you know that I was coming at this time?"

"I didn't know it. I saw you from the window. But I should have gone to your rooms again this evening, if you had not come here to-day."

"You must not do that, Edna," he replied. "It is not at all the proper thing to do."

"It is just as proper for me as it is for that—that black-eyed woman whom I found there."

"That is quite true, Edna," Lathrop

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admitted; "but, you see, it is wrong for either of you."

"Morris, who—?" the girl began, impetuously. But she checked herself. "No, I won't ask you who she is! I don't care who she is! . . . I—I wanted to see you—before you saw Carla. You will think that I have told her, but, indeed, I have not. I never meant to tell her, at all. I told you I would, but I did not mean it when I said it."

"I never really thought that you would tell," Lathrop said, gently, "unless you did it while you were very angry—and your anger never lasts long. It really would not have mattered if you had told, however. You must not think ill of that girl, Edna, for she is as pure and sweet and good as you are, as Carla is, as any human being can be."

"Do — you — love her — Morris?" Womanly curiosity forced the words from Edna's lips. She went closer to him as

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she asked the question, and her face was set and white. Her big eyes, wide-open and searching, looked earnestly into his own.

He replied without hesitation:

"Yes, Edna, I love her very dearly, just as I love you very dearly, but not at all in the sense you mean. It would please me more than I can say, if you would let me take you to call upon her some day. You know, I would not do that—"

"Where does she live now?" Edna interrupted. "She has moved."

"Yes, she has moved," Lathrop said. "If I tell you her address, will you promise to keep it a secret?"

"Why?"

"Never mind why; will you promise?"

"Yes," Edna agreed, after a moment of reflection.

"She is at the Millington, Central Park West. . . . And now, Edna, had you

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not better send my card up to Carla? She is expecting me."

"Oh, Morris!" the girl exclaimed, in dismay. "I had forgotten the very thing I meant to tell you. Carla knows."

"Knows what?" Lathrop questioned.

"That—that Miss Ortega goes to your rooms. Wait; let me tell you all about it. That man whom I hired to follow her—he was a cab-driver, and I gave him ten dollars for his dirty work—came here to report to me, as I told him to do. Carla was on the steps outside, and, when he asked for Miss Trevor of course she said she was the one; and he, stupid! didn't know the difference. She heard his story through, and then she came to me, and, naturally, I had to confess the whole thing. Then, the very next afternoon she received an anonymous letter written on the stationery of your club, and—oh, it was terrible!"

"Carla would pay no attention to an

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anonymous letter," Lathrop cried contemptuously.

"Not to an ordinary one; but this was different," Edna explained. It began by saying that the writer was a member of your club, and an intimate friend of yours. It gave, as an excuse for the letter, the statement that he was under great obligations to papa, and therefore regarded it as a duty to warn his daughter. It was beautifully written and perfectly told; it gave a thousand and one excuses for you, and begged Carla not to regard the matter too seriously. But underneath all that stuff and nonsense were the vilest insinuations. . . . It was terrible!"

"Is there anything more, Edna?" Lathrop demanded, quietly.

"Yes, there is," the girl faltered.

"Well, let's have it all," the young man urged; there was impatience in his tone.

"The evening before last, Mr. Chapman called here," Edna announced. "You

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know, he has been here once or twice with Mr. Courtright. Well, this time he came alone, and I only wished he had stayed away. I don't know how it happened, but, before he went, he mentioned having seen you at the Waldorf and other places several times this week, with a lady whom he described so perfectly that there was no mistaking her; Carla recognized her at once."

"How could she do that?" Lathrop was genuinely amazed.

"Oh!" Edna exclaimed. "Didn't I tell you that the anonymous letter contained a photograph of Miss Ortega? Well, it did, and a good one, too."

"What more, Edna?" Lathrop's voice came wearily now.

"Nothing more; only, Carla has been ill ever since. It was the last straw. I think, if you had come around sooner, it would have been all right, but you remained away so long that she had to send

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for you; and now—" She paused suddenly, staring in the direction of the door.

Lathrop, turning to discover what it was that had arrested her speech, perceived Carla, who had entered the room unheard, and now stood motionless, gazing upon her lover and her sister with scornful eyes. Even in his perturbation of the moment, Lathrop was stirred to wondering delight before the spell of her delicate loveliness. Her own mood of indignation had caused her to assume unconsciously a pose of tense erectness, which displayed the slender elegance of her form to its full perfection. Her angry pride was revealed in the haughty poise of her head, in the darkening violet of her eyes.

"It seems, Morris, that my sister has anticipated me," she said, coldly. "I heard only the last sentence of your conversation, however. So, now, Edna, if you will excuse us, I should like to talk with Morris alone for a little."

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She did not speak again, until Edna had left the room. Then, she turned at once, and confronted her fiancé.

"Morris," she demanded resolutely, "why is it that, for more than a week, you have not been to see me?" And she added, unfalteringly: "Is there a greater attraction somewhere else?"

"I have been very busy," Lathrop replied, with some embarrassment. "With two exceptions, I have not been out of my rooms an evening since I was here."

"That is an answer to only one of my questions," Carla retorted. There was a hint of bitterness now in her voice.

Lathrop frowned.

"The other question needs no answer from me," he said, grimly. "You should not have asked it."

"Perhaps not," his betrothed admitted, with a wan smile. "Nevertheless, I have asked it." She sighed heavily, and hesitated for a moment. Then, with straight-

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forward frankness, she demanded. "Will you tell me about Miss Ortega? There is such a person, I believe."

"Yes," Lathrop said. The reluctance in his voice was plainly manifest.

"Well, will you tell me about her?" Carla persisted.

"I am not at liberty to tell you much concerning her," was the reply.

A deeper red flamed in the cheeks of the girl at her lover's utterance, and her eyes flashed ominously.

"Not much that you can tell me!" she repeated, slowly. "Morris, I do not understand what you mean. Is it, perhaps, that this is not a fit subject for us to discuss?"

"God forbid!" Lathrop exclaimed, aghast at the implied taunt. "You must not wrong Clarita in that way, Carla. Indeed, she only came to my room as Edna, your sister came—just as innocently. It is most unfortunate that you

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should have come to know of her existence at this time. I had intended, soon, to ask you to call upon her. Surely, surely, Carla, you cannot doubt me!"

CHAPTER X

THE BROKEN ENGAGEMENT

CARLA TREVOR did not at once reply to the question that Lathrop asked. Instead, she kept her eyes fixed upon her lover's face, in the meantime turning her engagement ring on her finger, as though it had something to do with the character of her thoughts. There was no anger in her voice or in her eyes, but suffering was manifest in both. At last, she answered him.

"Just so long as this ring remains upon my finger, I will not doubt you. Still, I believe that you owe me some sort of an explanation. I would not have you think me jealous, for I could not permit our relations to continue if there existed any cause for such an emotion. But I shall

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ask you the question: Does there exist such a cause?"

"No, Carla, there does not," Lathrop answered, with emphasis.

The girl hesitated again, for a moment; then, she quietly extended a photograph toward him.

"Is that Miss Ortega?" she asked.

"Yes," was the answer.

"That picture came in a letter I received concerning her—and you!"

"Edna told me about it," Lathrop said, as she paused. "I believe that this picture was stolen from her parlor while she was locked in another room in her apartment, to which she had fled to escape the man, who forced his way into her presence. He must have taken it at that time. I can account for his possession of it in no other way."

"Then, you know who wrote the anonymous letter," Carla exclaimed.

"Certainly! It was written, doubtless,

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by the man who called upon you later—Chapman. Shall I tell you the story?"

"No, it is unnecessary that you should," the girl answered, disdainfully. "Tell me, rather, about Miss Ortega. What relation does she bear to you?"

"She is, in a sense, my ward," Lathrop made the statement with evident reluctance. . . . "I shall tell you all that it is permitted me to tell, at the present time. For the rest, you must have faith in me, dearest."

"Faith is spontaneous, Morris," the girl retorted. "It cannot be compelled by the will. As for that, I have faith now, Morris—at least, I think I have. I know that I do not wish to lose it. Whether I am to do so, or not, rests with you. . . . Has this ward of yours no relatives—no father, no mother, no friends?"

"At present," was the answer, "she has no one besides myself."

"No one besides yourself!" Carla re-

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peated, incredulously. "Then, pray, what is your relation to her? You have charge of her fortune, perhaps? For she has an income of her own, I suppose."

"She has an income—yes," Lathrop declared hastily.

Something in the manner of the young man's reply provoked his fiancée's suspicion.

"Who provides that income?" she inquired, crisply. "Is it you, Morris?"

"She believes it comes from property left to her by her father," was the evasion.

But the girl refused to be content by this indirectness.

"Morris," she said, gravely persistent, "is this income of Miss Ortega's really paid to her out of money provided for that purpose by you?"

Before such tenacity of purpose, Lathrop found himself helpless, and he bowed his head in assent. Afterward, for a little time, there was silence between the two.

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But, presently, the lover spoke again, softly, pleadingly:

“Carla, is it necessary to go into these details?”

The answer was rigidly uncompromising:

“I regard it as quite necessary. Will you tell me how long this condition of things has existed?”

“For several years—about four. If you will listen, I will tell you all that can be told—now.”

“I will listen.”

“The obligation came to me in a strange manner, and I accepted a duty, fully realizing what I was undertaking, but convinced there was no other course for me to pursue. At that time, Clarita Ortega could not speak a word of English, but I brought her here to New York, and found a companion for her—an elderly lady, who has since died. I invested some money in government-bonds in her name;

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so that, in case of accident to me, she would be above want. So far as it has been possible, I have watched over and cared for her ever since; I shall continue to do so as long as the necessity exists. I can assure you that she is in every way entirely worthy of your respect, even of your love. More than this, I cannot tell you, now. You must not ask me. The truth concerning her I have no right to reveal, even to you. Carla, will you go with me to call on her?"

"Morris!" The girl's tone was one of indignant remonstrance.

"Well? Is that not the best proof that I could give you of my sincerity?"

Lathrop had been holding the photograph in his hand during the conversation, now he placed it, face upwards, on a chair near him, and, rising, stepped forward and stood where he could look down into the eyes of his fiancée.

She returned the gaze steadily, still toy-

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ing with the ring on her finger. But she did not reply to his question; instead, she asked one.

"Is that all you will tell me concerning her?" she inquired.

"It is all that I can tell you, Carla," was the firm rejoinder.

"Do you regard your duty to her as greater than your duty to me?"

"I do not compare the one with the other, for they are distinct. Duty is duty; it cannot be modified."

Her eyes never left his face, and the question, though it made him catch his breath, and pressed the iron into his soul, was uttered as calmly as the others had been.

"If I should make my faith in you dependent upon your telling me everything that you are keeping back concerning her, would you still retain the attitude you have taken? If our engagement depended upon your replying to certain questions

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that I should ask, would you still refuse to answer?"

He turned away and walked to the window, and for a moment looked out upon the street. Presently, he returned and stood before her again.

"I should still retain the attitude I have taken; I should still refuse to answer," he said, deliberately.

Carla withdrew the ring from her finger, slowly, but certainly. It seemed reluctant to leave its resting-place, and twice she hesitated. But, at last, the removal was effected.

"Then, I must return this to you," she said, simply. "It is the only thing I can do under the circumstances. Perhaps, I am unjust; if so, I cannot help it. Please take it, Morris."

He stretched out one hand silently, and she dropped the ring in his palm. For a moment, he regarded it intently; then, idly, let it fall into one of his pockets.

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"As you will, Carla," he said, with a cold deliberation that belied the furious beating of his heart.

He bowed then, and turned toward the door. But, before he had taken a step, it was opened, and George Trevor entered the room.

"Ah, Morris," he said, "Smith told me you were here. I have just come in, and I am very anxious to see you. I tried in vain to get you over the telephone this afternoon." His eyes fell on the photograph of Clarita Ortega, and he bent over it. "Hello! What's this?" he asked, carelessly.

He reached out and raised the photograph in his hand, and they saw him give a sudden and violent start. Then, with quick strides he went to the window where the light was better, while with trembling hands he held the photograph so that he could scan it critically.

"No, no!" he exclaimed, under his

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breath. "No! It is impossible!" He turned the picture over and saw the name of the photographer on the back; then, he studied the face again.

"It was taken here in New York, and quite recently. No; it cannot be the same," he continued, uttering his thoughts aloud.

"Carla," he called suddenly, "whose picture is this?"

"It is a photograph of a friend of Morris's," she replied.

"Who is it, Morris?" he demanded, still studying the picture face.

"Her name is Clarita Ortega; she is Spanish," Morris answered.

"Spanish, too," muttered Trevor. "It is very strange—very strange!"

"Do you know who she is, papa? Have you ever met her?" asked Carla.

"No, no, certainly not!" was the quick answer. "But she bears a striking resemblance to a lady whom I used to know.

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years ago. She is very like, indeed—very like! How old is this girl, Morris?”

“About Carla’s age,” Lathrop replied, indifferently.

“And where does she live? Here in New York?”

“Yes.”

“Will you lend me this picture till you come again?” the financier demanded. “I should like to compare it with one that I have. The likeness may not be so striking, then. Will you lend it to me?” Without waiting for an answer, he whirled about, and went out of the room hastily, bearing the picture in his hand.

“Is your decision unaltered, Carla?” Morris asked, when they were again alone.

The girl nodded in silence.

He did not wait for more, but turned abruptly and walked from the room.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE MESH OF MISDEEDS

AT once, after leaving the Trevor mansion, Lathrop returned to his apartment. As he caught sight of his reflection in a mirror, his eyes glinted with cold derision.

"I cannot tell Carla everything," he mused aloud. "God forbid! Better a broken engagement than that—whatever the heart-ache. Yes, better two broken hearts than a revelation of the whole truth. I suppose, in time, we must both recover from the shock of to-day. But the knowledge of that other tragedy would spoil her life, utterly. And the poor old pater! How the sight of that photograph bowled him over! The resemblance must, indeed, be striking, since it was able to affect him

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like that. And now he will question me, and I cannot, I will not, tell him, for he must not know the truth. For the sake of Carla and Edna, he must never know."

The ringing of the bell interrupted his meditation. He went to the door, and opened it to admit George Trevor. "He has come sooner even than I expected," was his thought. But he allowed no trace of his perturbation to escape him. On the contrary, he greeted his visitor in a matter-of-fact manner, but very cordially.

"I went away hurriedly," he added, after they had shaken hands. "I quite forgot that you wished to see me. What was it, pater?"

"Oh, that matter!" the financier rejoined moodily, as he seated himself. "It can wait. I want to talk to you about another thing, now. . . . Can you give me some brandy, and a cigar?"

"Certainly, sir," Lathrop replied, and forthwith he set forth a decanter and

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syphon, and a box of perfectos. "Do you know, pater, you haven't been here before in—"

But the financier, with an air of determination, interrupted:

"Morris," he demanded, "who is that girl?"

"What girl?" came the disingenuous question.

"That girl whose picture I found in the drawing-room of my house," the banker explained, eagerly. "Who is she? The name tells me nothing. Is she a friend of yours? Do you know her people, her parents?"

The reply of the young man was made very deliberately:

"I know her father, sir," he said. "I never saw her mother."

Trevor gave a sigh of relief. Then, he spoke, rather hesitatingly:

"It may seem strange to you, Morris, that I should be so greatly interested in

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this girl. But—well, I never saw such a remarkable likeness!”

“Likeness to whom, sir?” Lathrop questioned.

“To—a lady—whom I once knew.” The reply was made with evident reluctance. “It was a good many years ago when—” He broke off the sentence to inquire: “How old is she, Morris?”

“Rather older than Carla,” Lathrop answered, “by two or three years.”

Trevor shook his head perplexedly, as he listened to the reply.

“Perhaps,” he murmured reflectively, “her mother was a sister of the woman whom I knew. Still, I never heard that she had a sister. . . . Morris,” he went on, in a louder voice, looking up at the young man, “could you take me to call on this young lady? I should like to have a talk with her.”

Lathrop did not reply at once. In-

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stead, he continued to stare fixedly at the coals in the grate. The silence endured until Trevor repeated his question, believing that it had been unheard.

"Why not?" the young man was musing. "I have had no hand in this part of the affair. Why not let circumstances direct the remainder of it, as they have this much?"

For the third time, Trevor asked the question, impatiently. And, finally, Lathrop replied:

"I will take you to call upon her," he said, somewhat coldly. "When would you like to go?"

"Now!" was the instant response.

"My dear sir, it is almost dinner-time," Lathrop protested. "Come here after you have dined, and I will take you to her."

"Very well, then. I shall be here at eight," the financier assented. He rose

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and went toward the door; but he paused, with his hand on the knob, to ask another question.

"Morris," he said, "what is she to you? You won't mind telling me?"

"Not at all, sir," was the reply. "She is my ward."

"Your ward!" Trevor exclaimed, in astonishment. "You, the guardian of a girl almost as old as you are yourself?"

"Such is the case, pater," Lathrop affirmed, quite unabashed.

There was a brief silence, which was broken by the broker.

"Was she the subject of discussion between you and Carla?"

"Yes," the young man admitted, flushing.

The shrewd eyes of the older man penetrated Lathrop's embarrassment.

"Carla is jealous! Is that it?" he demanded.

A nod of assent was the answer. Then,

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after a moment, Lathrop said; "you might as well know it at once, sir. Our engagement is at an end. Carla is convinced in her own mind that I have not been sufficiently frank with her. What else she believes, I do not know. I am not sure that she herself knows. But—she does not approve of my relations with 'Rita.'"

At this statement, the financier uttered an ejaculation of dismay, and, for a little time afterward, sat silent, in frowning thought. But, of a sudden, his expression changed again.

"Oh, by the way!" he exclaimed. "There is another thing. Those securities! The fact of my having them has got out, somehow, and I am being pestered to death about them—everybody asking questions! I smile, look wise, and say nothing! It's the only way! Why, Morris, even the company—the X. L., you know—has been bothering me. I fancy

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that a cable of inquiry has been sent to Sam Millington himself. But he will keep the matter quiet, won't he?"

"What do you mean, sir?" Lathrop questioned, bewildered and alarmed by this turn of the conversation.

"Why, the fact that the stock is yours," the financier explained. "Millington won't spread the fact broadcast, will he? I shouldn't like to have the news of it get about, now that I have made use of it as my own. It would betray the fact that I had been hard-pressed. . . . But never mind, just now. Come down in the morning, and we can arrange the affair then. I'm inclined, at last, to be sorry that I refused young Millington's offer."

"It is not too late, yet," Lathrop suggested quickly. "If you say the word, I'll manage that. And, to speak frankly, sir, I should be glad to do so. Your consent would be something of a favor to me."

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"The deuce it would!" the financier cried. "Why didn't you say that before? You're half-owner with me in this thing. You have as much to say as I have. Wire him that we will take him on the terms he offered, if he is still of the same mind."

Forthwith, Trevor bustled out of the room, leaving Lathrop standing in the centre of it in anything but a pleasant frame of mind, for he saw the meshes of his misdeeds closing around him, exposure staring him in the face.

"A cable to Sam Millington!" he mused, and smiled dismally. "I should like to see him when he gets the news! One thing is certain: I must manage somehow, to get those securities out to-morrow, and return them to the vault. But, even then, it is bound to come out eventually that I took them, for the superintendent has the letter Jack gave me. Well, sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

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Meantime, I must do the best I can, despite the fact that I have lost honor and love. Why, I should not have accepted my dismissal, had I been worthy, as I was ten days ago. But it is over now! I only wish it were the end of all things for me!" And, with this lugubrious aspiration, he hurried forth.

A few minutes later, the word "Correct" was speeding over the wires to Jack Millington's Chicago address.

CHAPTER XII

THE SINISTER SOUVENIR

PROMPTLY at eight o'clock, George Trevor appeared at Lathrop's apartment, and it was easily apparent that he was consumed by excitement, although he strove as best he could to conceal the fact. He had come in his own carriage, and, when the young man had donned his overcoat, the two were driven rapidly in the direction of The Millington, where Clarita now lived.

They found the girl at home and expecting them, for Lathrop had sent word of their coming. Immediately, her loveliness of face and the splendid purity of the dark eyes cast their spell over the financier. Indeed, he fairly gasped for breath in the first moment of his introduc-

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tion to her, and, after he had taken her slender hand in his, he held it for a long time in a warm clasp, strangely silent all the while as he stood looking down on her with a steadfast, penetrant gaze that had in it nothing to offend.

"Very like, marvelously like!" he murmured, at last. And then, without seeming to perceive the oddity of the question, he demanded: "Child, do you remember your mother?"

The girl regarded him in complete astonishment.

"My mother?" she repeated, confusedly. "No, sir, I do not remember my mother. I never saw her, señor."

"But do you not resemble her?" came the eager question.

"I do not know," Clarita replied, stupefied with amazement.

These were, in sooth, most curious interrogatories put to her by one who was totally a stranger. Before them, she

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found herself altogether puzzled, even a little indignant. She turned her eyes inquiringly toward Morris, but he was apparently deeply occupied by the pages of a book, unheeding what took place about him.

"And your father, my dear girl? What of him?" Trevor asked, tremulously.

"I never saw my father, sir," was the reply. "But tell me, if you please," she continued, with sudden courage, "why do you seek these answers from me?"

"You must pardon me, child," the old man urged, contritely. "But you look so like a lady whom I once knew that I fancied I must have known your mother. Surely, you have not lived always in New York? You were not born here?"

"Oh, no, indeed," Clarita returned, readily. "I was born in Seville, in Spain. My childhood was passed in Cuba and in Mexico. I remember Mexico the better,

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for it was there that I lived the greater part of the time. I came here about four years ago." She gave the explanation volubly, for her self-assurance had been restored in a measure by the visitor's explanation of his inquisitiveness.

The girl, as well as her questioner, had remained standing since the introduction. Now, however, she withdrew her hand from his, and sank into a chair.

"Will you tell me how old you are, señorita?" Trevor requested, as he, too, seated himself.

"I was twenty-three years old, last June," was the immediate response, although the girl's eyes widened somewhat in new wonder at the intimacy of this question. "But Morris," she continued, "thinks I look much younger than that."

"Yes, you do," the financier agreed. "You are more of a child than Edna, and she is only eighteen."

"Edna? Ah, yes. She is your daugh-

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ter. I have seen her." Clarita's brows contracted, for the recollection was not a pleasant one.

"You have met Edna?" Trevor asked, in surprise. "Where?"

She hesitated, and then looked inquiringly at Morris. He, however, was still studying the pages before him, and did not appear to have heard.

"Morris will tell you about it," she said, at last, demurely. "We met by accident. She did not like me, and I did not like her. It was—what you call—mutual. You see I am frank, Señor Trevor. But I do not choose my words so discreetly in English."

"Would you prefer your own language?" he said rapidly, in Spanish. "It is the same to me."

"Oh, yes! It is the language of my thoughts. I am glad that you understand it. And now, sir, can I not offer you some refreshment? I have been very re-

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miss. You will have—what? A glass of sherry? And a biscuit? Morris will give you a cigar. I do not object to the smoke. And now, for one moment, you will excuse me?”

She went rapidly out of the room, leaving the two men alone together.

“Morris,” said George Trevor then, rising and crossing the room and deliberately taking the book from Lathrop’s hand, “you told me you knew her father. Did you speak the truth?”

“I did,” Lathrop declared. His eyes met those of the financier squarely, with a challenge in their depths.

“Then, he is alive?” Trevor suggested.

“He is!”

“But she does not know it?”

“No.”

“Where—?” The old man left the question unfinished, for at this moment the girl reëntered the room.

She went directly to him, holding in

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her hand an old-fashioned breast-pin, the size of a goose's egg. At sight of it, Trevor's face took on the color of ashes; but he did not speak, and she did not notice his agitation.

"You asked me about my mother," she said. "I do not remember her, but I have here a portrait which, I believe, is hers. Would you like to see it? Perhaps, if you once knew her, you will recognize it, and assure me that it is my mother. It might have been made for me, might it not?"

"Yes, yes," he said, huskily. "It might, indeed! Can you tell me nothing about her, my child? Do you not know when she died, and where she died?"

"No, sir. I know nothing," the girl replied, sadly. "It is strange, is it not? I do not even know her name."

"Do not know her name? Was it not the same as your own?"

"No, oh, no!" came the eager answer.

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"My name is not the name of my parents. The Holy Mother gave me my name, at the cathedral in Mexico, so it is truly mine; but it is not the name to which I was born. That is hidden. It is lost! I do not know how, nor why. Even my first name was changed, for I remember, when I was a little child, I was called Carlotta; but, when I was taken to the cathedral, it was made into Clarita. I like it better, I think. Morris says that, some day I shall know who my parents were. Sometimes, I think that he knows now, and will not tell me. If that be so, I do not complain. He knows what is wisest and best for me. I am assured of that."

"Carlotta—Carlotta!" Trevor exclaimed. "It is the name of one of my daughters: it is Carla's name. It was—was it your mother's name?"

"I do not know," Clarita answered.

The financier sat staring at the picture he held in his hand. For the moment, he

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was utterly oblivious to everything else around him, and Morris, raising his eyes, regarded the old man sadly and steadily.

"Have you anything else that belonged to your mother," asked Trevor, presently. "Is there anything else that was hers that you would care to show me?"

"I think not, señor," the girl said. "But stay!" she added. "There is one thing more that was hers, as I have been told. You will think that it is a very strange thing to exhibit. I do not know why it was given to me as a keepsake, only that, when Señor Llorente, in whose family I resided while in Mexico, gave it to me, he said: 'You will take this with you also, 'Rita. If your father is living, and you should meet him, he will wish to see it.'" At this announcement, Lathrop looked up in surprise, and, perceiving it, she continued: "I do not think that Morris even knows about this keepsake. I have never told him, because I had forgot-

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ten. He shall see it now at the same time that I show it to you. It is not pleasant; it is not nice. It is a very strange thing to give to a child as a keepsake, and I have kept it hidden in my trunk. I will get it. You will excuse me?"

Again, she left the room, and again Trevor's eyes wondered in the direction of the young man; but he did not speak, and their eyes did not meet, for Lathrop was once more apparently absorbed in the pages of the book.

Clarita was some time absent, but, at last, she returned. Her hands were behind her, and she came quite close to her guest before she exposed them. Then, bringing them suddenly forward, she said simply:

"It is—this!"

George Trevor, who had risen at her entrance, stood like one entranced. Cataplexy could not have held him more rigidly still than he was then, with wide-open,

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distended eyes, drawn and haggard features, parted lips and bated breath.

At last, slowly, mechanically, he extended one hand and took the thing she held out to him—a double sheath made of one piece of wood, skillfully carved and inlaid with gold and silver and precious stones. He did not speak. He held it in his hand, and stared at it as though it were a serpent that had fascinated him.

“It is not pretty,” she continued, not heeding his perturbation. “It is deadly. I do not admire it.”

Slowly, and with familiar precision, Trevor stretched forth the other hand, and withdrew the knives from their sheaths, one after the other. It was as though he were forced to do so against his will. He seemed to have forgotten his surroundings, to see only those two curiously-wrought weapons that he now held in his grasp: one, a short, dagger-like instrument, sharpened only on one side, but keen

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as a razor and pointed like a needle; the other, long, slender, deadly, venomous in every curve, glitteringly bright, sinister, murderous. It glinted flashes of light from its polished surface, and the tiny, graceful curves along its back seemed to move up and down, as though possessed of life—and hatred.

Trevor was so long silent, that, at last, 'Rita looked up, inquiringly. As she beheld his face, she started back, affrightedly.

"Morris!" she called, in a panic of fear.

The young man sprang to her at sound of the terror in her voice.

"Look," she whispered, pointing toward the old man—now old indeed! "What is it? What is the matter? See! Quick! My God, he will kill himself!"

It is true that he would have done so. The mysterious knife seemed to have compelled him to the act, for, with startling suddenness, the cataleptic condition left

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him. He laughed aloud, wildly; raised the weapon in the air; and would have plunged it into his breast had not Lathrop's hand seized his wrist and held it. Then, the fingers loosened their hold, and the evil knife fell to the floor, point downward, piercing the carpet and penetrating the board beneath. And there it stood, quivering.

For an instant, the old man stared down at it dazedly; then, he hid his face in his hands, dropped back into his chair, and sobbed aloud.

'Rita looked up wonderingly into Morris's face, but he offered her no explanation. Instead, he put one arm gently around her, and led her into another room.

"What is it?" she asked again. "What does it mean?"

"I do not know, dear," was the answer. "Perhaps, he will tell me. I must take him home now, but I will return."

"Oh, Morris," she pleaded; "you will

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come back? I am frightened. You will return? Promise me that you will!"

"I promise, 'Rita. As soon as I have seen the pater home, I will return. You need not go in to bid him good-night; it is not necessary."

Then, he touched her forehead with his lips, and left her. In the parlor, the knife was still maliciously swaying to and fro above the carpet, like the head of a cobra, waiting to strike. Lathrop plucked it from the floor, and returned it, together with its fellow, to the sheath. This done, he touched Trevor gently on the shoulder.

"Come, pater," he said gently. "Let us go, now."

"Yes, yes! Let us go, now," the financier assented, with pitiful anxiety. "Yes, I must get away, at once. I must think. My God, Morris, do you understand what this thing means to me? Do you know who this girl is?"

"Hush! hush! Not another word here!"

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the young man commanded. "Let me help you on with your coat. Now, are you ready, sir?"

"Yes, I am ready," was the answer. Nevertheless, Trevor still stood expectant, his eyes roving toward the door by which Clarita had gone out of the room. "Where—?" he began.

But Lathrop interrupted the question, ere it was formed.

"Never mind," he urged. "I said good-night for you, pater."

Thereat, the old man sighed wistfully; and then the two went down to the street, and entered the carriage, without another word spoken between them. And in utter silence they drove homeward, and in silence they parted.

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT CARLA DARED

IT is a remarkable thing that the very people whom we regard as the most self-contained under trying circumstances are the very ones, who, when they do give way, lose all vestige of self-control, and plunge head-foremost to the opposite extreme. The fires that burned within the breast of Carla Trevor had hitherto only smoldered. They had been confined within herself, their presence unsuspected, and, therefore, the danger of them was unheeded. But, when she had recovered from the shock of Lathrop's abrupt departure, the smoldering embers burst forth into flame, and consumed her reason, her judgment, and her faith. When she returned the ring to Morris, she did not real-

WHAT CARLA DARED

ly doubt his loyalty to her. The act was based upon her idea of the principle which, as she believed, was involved; she had broken the engagement because he had refused to confide in her, and for no other reason. She was not, in any sense of the word, a coquette. Nevertheless, she had coquetted with him then, for she had had no suspicion, when she offered the ring to him, that he would accept it. She could not know anything of the self-abasement under which he hourly struggled since he had taken that step downward, which, in his own opinion, forever removed him from the realm in which he had lived all his life—that of unqualified uprightness. Therefore, his calm acquiescence in her decision prostrated her, overwhelmed her, shocked her out of herself into another being, whom she had not known, whom she did not recognize, but who now dominated every impulse within her. She had asked for an explanation—she had demanded

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it. And, all the time, in her own heart, she knew that there was a sufficient one. She had spoken naught but the truth when she said that she was not jealous. She did not doubt him when he told her what he did; her one cause of indignation against him was that he did not tell her all.

Now, however, she saw things differently. Her recollection of the scene distorted everything that had been said or done out of all recognizable shape, and she discovered motives which she had not imagined at the time, and fancied reasons which were utterly unreasonable. His refusal to explain farther than he had, was now attributed to guilt and shame. His statement concerning the purity of Clarita Ortega, she now regarded as a lie. The high value that he had placed upon her own love for him had become a subterfuge. His pretense of mystery degenerated to a contemptible deception; and, with it all, she moaned in pain while she assured

WHAT CARLA DARED

herself that he no longer loved her, and convinced herself that he was at heart rejoiced because she had severed the bond between them. Still, she made no outward sign. The fierce warfare that raged within found no visible expression; but she was transformed from a calm, serene, loving woman, abounding in faith, into a hard, suspicious relentless being who saw only evil in the association of Morris Lathrop and Clarita Ortega.

So, the demons entered and took possession of Carla Trevor. After hours of agonized thought, she determined on a course of action, and she forthwith set out toward the consummation of her purpose with a resolution that was not to be denied. Shortly before eight o'clock on the night following her dismissal of Lathrop, she visited Edna's room, outwardly as calm and self-possessed as ever, and she even smiled contemptuously when she found her sister in tears. She knew well the cause

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of those tears, but she forbore any reference to them. It seemed to her rather in the nature of presumption that Edna should thus weep when she could not.

"I wish you to tell me again concerning your encounter with that woman at Morris's apartment," she said, without any hesitation.

"There is nothing to tell," Edna returned. "I saw her there, that is all. She had just as much right to be there as I had, and it would be just as consistent for you to think ill of me for going there as to think ill of her."

Carla smiled. There was no sign of softening in her manner, no hesitation.

"You are vehement, Edna," she said; "too vehement, I think, in your defense of Miss Ortega. Do you know the present address of the woman whom you so ably defend?"

"Yes, I do. And I'll tell you one thing, Carla Trevor," Edna went on

WHAT CARLA DARED

spiritedly. "That address alone is sufficient proof that all your suspicions are groundless. Do you think, if the facts were as your jealous imagination paints them, that he would take her to a place like the Millington? That is where she is now. Would he do that if there were any grounds for your suspicions? You ought to be ashamed of them—and of yourself! I know a good woman when I see one, and, if ever I saw one in my life, it was when I saw Clarita Ortega. Do you know what I did then? I insulted her. I refused to be introduced. Oh, I played the grand lady better than old Madam Savage could have done it, and I have been eating my heart out with shame ever since. Just as sure as I live until tomorrow morning, I am going up to the Millington, and humble myself with the most abject apology I know how to make; and you will do well if you follow my example."

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"You are a very good girl, but a very silly one at times, Edna," said Carla, with quiet scorn. "I do not think that we need to prolong this discussion. Good-night."

She went out of the room in the same deliberate manner in which she had entered it, leaving Edna disconsolate. It was nearly nine o'clock, but Carla did not hesitate. She had made her plans, and she was determined to carry them out. So, it happened that, only a few minutes later, closely wrapped and veiled, she was on the street, walking rapidly. The air was cold and keen, and she walked on and on, thinking, thinking, all the time of the young woman she was determined to see before she slept again; planning how she would win her way into Clarita's presence, for she had no doubt that she would be denied admittance if she were known, and she was equally sure that Morris had warned this Spanish girl against her. Could she have looked ahead into Clarita's

WHAT CARLA DARED

parlor then, she would have seen her own father standing in the centre of the room with uplifted weapon, ready to strike; she would have seen agony and remorse in his face, wonder, doubt and horror in that of his hostess, dismay in that of her lover there with them.

As she drew near the building, two men came out, one half-supporting the other, and she recognized them both: her discarded lover, and her father; but she walked on steadily, knowing that they could not recognize her veiled face. She could have touched them with her hands when she turned aside to pass them. She did not comment upon the encounter, even to herself. Her mind was too much engrossed with her own affairs. But the meeting assured her of one thing—that her own interview with the girl would not be interrupted; and she went on past the house, turning to see if both of the men entered the carriage. Then, when the

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carriage had driven away, she passed through the great front door, and went to the elevator.

"Miss Ortega," she said. "She is expecting me, I believe. I will not wait to send up my card. Which floor is it?"

"The top," the attendant answered, unsuspectingly.

When the elevator stopped, the boy stepped out, led her to the door of Clarita's apartment, rang the bell for her, and then hastened back to his car, and disappeared down the shaft.

A maid opened the door. As it swung ajar, Carla stepped within the hallway, quickly.

"I wish to see Miss Ortega," she said, and passed on into the parlor, where she paused in the centre of the room on the very spot where her father had stood, only a little while before.

"Whom shall I say, madame?" asked the maid, who had followed her.

WHAT CARLA DARED

“Say that a lady—one whom she knows by name, at least—wishes to see her.”

The maid withdrew, and then Carla's eyes swept the room in sharp, comprehensive glances, as if she were striving to learn something of the unknown's character by the environment. She was still engaged in this occupation of curiosity, when she was startled by the sound of a gentle voice speaking behind her:

“I am told that you wished to see me.”

As the words fell on her ears, Carla turned swiftly, while she threw back her veil, and so, for the first time, she stood face to face with Clarita Ortega.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ACCUSATION

FOR a brief interval, the two girls remained silently facing each other. Clarita's face showed now a courteous interrogation as to this unexpected visitor's presence, although it revealed, as well, some traces of the scene through which she had just passed. Carla's expression, on the other hand, was studiously calm, and her violet eyes surveyed the countenance of her companion with a scrutiny that would have been impertinent had there been less surprise in her gaze. She was, indeed, greatly startled, for she had not expected to encounter such loveliness and purity in the face of Clarita Ortega.

The Spanish girl was the first to break the awkward silence.

THE ACCUSATION

"You wished to see me?" she said again. Her voice was kindly, and expressed nothing more than she uttered. It was evident that she had no idea as to the identity of her caller.

"Yes," Carla returned, steeling her heart against the fascination that shone out from the face before her; "yes, I wished to see you."

"Will you be seated?" Clarita asked quietly, disguising her astonishment at the strangeness of the other's manner.

"No, thank you," came the crisp retort; "I do not care to sit down. I suppose, Miss Ortega, that you do not guess who I am?"

"No, I do not know you," Clarita admitted. "Perhaps, you will be good enough to tell me your name."

"I am Miss Trevor," was the curt announcement. "Do you know me now?"

The other girl uttered a little gasp of amazement, and her face paled suddenly.

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At the same time, she took a step backward. But she recovered herself in the same instant, and, motioning toward a chair, said slowly.

"It is very good of you to call upon me, Miss Trevor. Won't you be seated, please?"

Carla laughed—a low, irritating laugh, without any hint of mirth in it.

"No," she said coldly; "I do not care to sit down." Her manner made the words insulting.

"Then, why have you come here, Miss Trevor?" Clarita demanded, indignantly.

"I have already told you: I came to see you," was the deliberate answer.

"And is that all?" Clarita exclaimed, in new bewilderment.

Carla stared insolently at the girl whom she regarded as her rival.

"No, it is not quite all," she declared. "I intend to say a few things to you, Miss Ortega."

THE ACCUSATION

"Then, I must beg that you will be so kind as to say them at once." The request was made with an air of extreme hauteur.

Carla, nevertheless, maintained her poise of scornful indifference.

"Rest assured that I shall say them before my departure," she answered. "You are quite sure that you know who I am?"

"Yes. You are Carla Trevor, the lady whom Morris is to marry."

"You are mistaken as to that," Carla announced.

"Mistaken!" Clarita repeated the word, amazedly.

"I am Clara Trevor, but I am not the lady whom Morris Lathrop is to marry. I have returned his ring to him. We are nothing to each other, now. Do you not know why this is so?"

"Oh, I am so sorry! so sorry!" Rita exclaimed, sympathetically.

"You, sorry!" Carla cried out, angrily.

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“You need not indulge in falsehoods, Miss Ortega; they can do you no good. Do you mean to tell me that you did not know the engagement between Mr Lathrop and me was broken? Would you have me believe that he did not at once fly to you with the good news? I saw him leave here only a moment ago, in company with my father. Have you got him in your toils, also—my father? Is he another of your victims, Señorita Ortega?”

“I do not know what you mean, Miss Trevor.” The reply was uttered with quiet dignity. But, now, Clarita’s eyes began to sparkle with rising anger, although she controlled herself, and permitted no other sign of it to appear. “I do not know the object of your call—your manner is not at all in keeping with the descriptions I have had of you. But I am really very sorry for you—sorry that your engagement—”

“I certainly did not come here as a sup-

THE ACCUSATION

pliant for your pity," interrupted Carla. "You may keep that for yourself, for you need it more than I do. Perhaps, however, you think that, now I am out of the way, he will make you his wife."

'Rita uttered a low cry of pain, and started back, placing one hand against her heart. Her face became paler still, and her great eyes gazed piteously upon her tormentor.

"Marry me!" she exclaimed. "Marry me? Make me his wife? No, no, Miss Trevor, that is not for me! He does not love me!"

"But you love him!" Carla cried, wrathfully. "I see it in your eyes, hear it in your voice, read it in your manner! You love him!"

Clarita stood before the outburst in proud patience.

"Yes, I do love him," she said, softly. "Is there any shame in that? I have loved him ever since the first moment I

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saw him, when he was so good to me. I shall love him to the last moment of my life. Is there any shame in that?"

"You are frank about it, at least. And, because you do love him, you have given yourself to him body and soul!"

"I do not know what you mean by giving myself to him body and soul," was the reply. "I cannot pretend to understand you. I have given him my heart, for that is mine to bestow where I will, but he does not know that he possesses it. My soul belongs to God, not to him, nor to you, nor to me. It is God's, and the Holy Mother has it in her keeping."

"You dare to say such things—you?" gasped Carla.

"Why not? It is true. Is it wrong that I should love Morris? Very, well then, I have done wrong; but I could not help it. I did not know that I loved him until he told me about you, and I knew that a day would come when I should lose

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him. It was then that I discovered what my heart had done, all in silence and in secrecy. But he does not know that I love him. I have never told him, and I have tried—oh, so hard!—to hide it from him. I look away from him sometimes when he speaks to me, fearing that he will discover it. Ah, you do not know—you cannot imagine the pain! You do not mean all that you say and do now, for you are mad with jealousy, but there is no cause. He does not love me; he loves only you. Believe me, it is true. I am nothing to him—nothing!”

“You are—”

“Wait, please; let me finish,” Clarita insisted. “Then, perhaps, you will think better of what you were about to say, for I see in the expression of your eyes that it is not pleasant.”

“Say on; I will hear you to the end,” Carla said.

“It is, perhaps, natural,” Clarita con-

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tinued, "that you should feel as you do toward me, since he was—and, I trust, will be again—your accepted lover. I do not know, but I think that I might feel the same, if I believed that I had reason to do so. I might be angrier than you are, for I am very impetuous—I do not always think before I speak! But now, Miss Trevor, there is no cause. For the harsh things you have said since you came here, I forgive you. Can we not be friends?"

She put one hand out hesitatingly, and took a step forward. There was entreaty in her eyes and in her voice. She really desired to be friends with this girl whom Morris loved, for, as yet, she had not guessed the horrible conviction that was in the other's mind.

"Friends with you?" exclaimed Carla, with such withering contempt that 'Rita involuntarily shrank away. Of a sudden now, she understood, and, before the real-

THE ACCUSATION

ization, she cowered as from a blow. It was a gesture which Carla misinterpreted, for she regarded it as an acknowledgment of guilt. "Do you suppose that I do not know?" she continued, with increased scorn. "And why else do you suppose I broke the engagement? Who supports you? Morris Lathrop! Whose money purchases the luxuries with which you are surrounded? Morris Lathrop's! Who hires your apartments for you? He does! Who has moved you about from place to place, from apartment to apartment, lest your address and your existence should be discovered? Always Morris Lathrop! And you dare to stand there with your baby face and innocent air, and ask me to be your friend! I would sooner fondle a snake than touch your hand. You talk about your soul belonging to God! It belongs to Morris Lathrop, for you sold it to him in return for jewels and dresses, a luxuriant home.

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‘And you have the effrontery to propose friendship with me!’

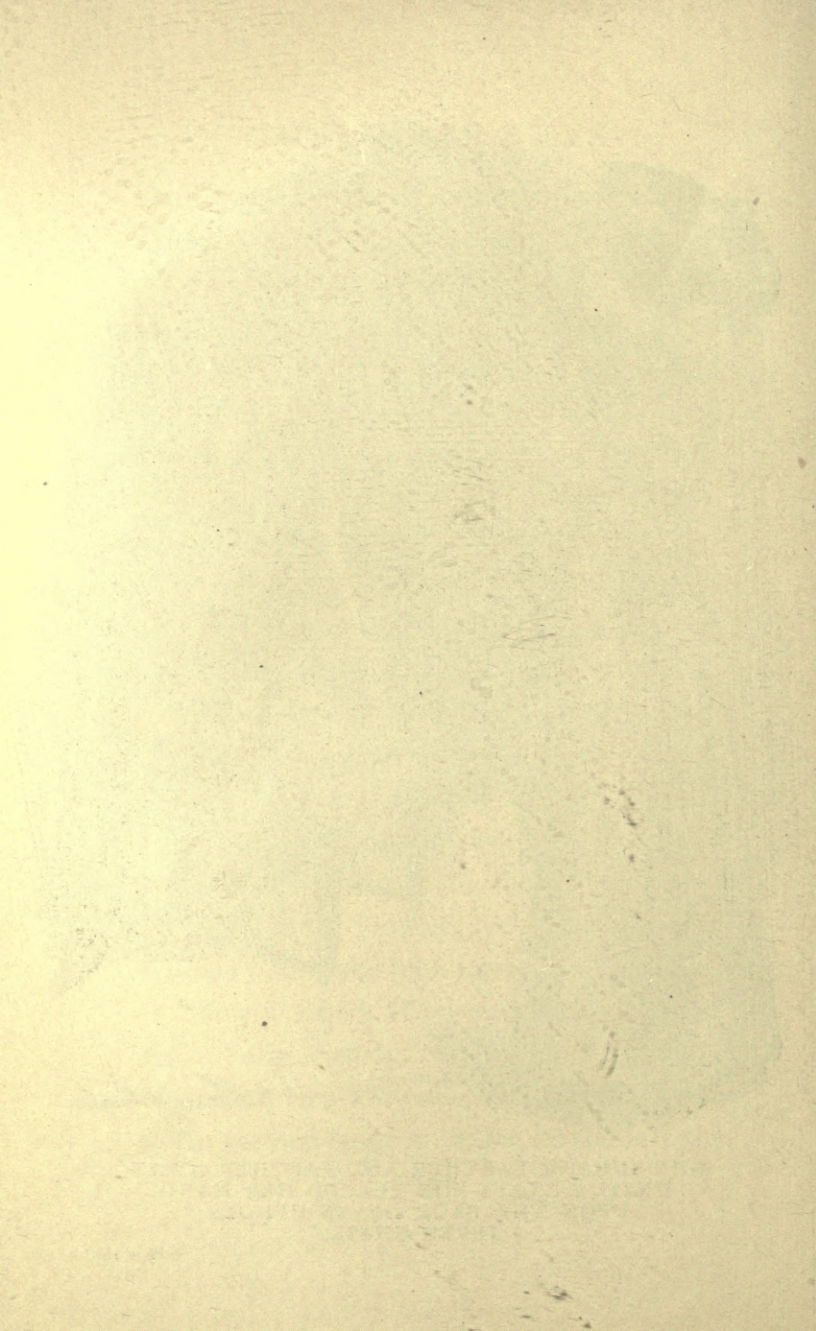
Still, ‘Rita did not speak. She could only gaze upon her accuser in a wide-eyed horror too profound for expression; and she shrank farther and farther away, until at last she placed her hand upon the back of an upholstered chair, and leaned upon it, utterly overwhelmed.

“I wonder if you realize how I despise myself for coming here,” Carla continued. “It lowers me for the moment to your own level, and that is beneath contempt. But I wished to see you; I wanted to see a woman who would sell herself for cash. I wanted to see a woman, who, although devoid of heart and soul and decency, yet possessed the witchery to make men mad.”

“Stop!” cried ‘Rita, suddenly, and her voice rang clearly. There was no more shrinking in her attitude. Her slight form seemed to grow taller, as she left the



SHE SHRANK FARTHER AND FARTHER AWAY,
UNTIL AT LAST SHE PLACED HER HAND
UPON THE BACK OF AN UPHOLS-
TERED CHAIR.



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chair against which she had been leaning, and with firm tread approached near to Carla. The pathetic tenderness and sorrowful sympathy were gone from her eyes, now. The horror was still there, but through it sparkled indignant protest, righteous anger and unalterable resolve. "You go too far, Miss Trevor," she said, with emphasis. "You are bad, cruel, bitter. It is you who should feel the shame, not I! You come here, uninvited, to my house—and for what? To insult me! Is that the act of a lady? You accuse me of things that I cannot mention, and you know in your own heart that they are false. I will not discuss them with you. Why should I? I care not for your scorn, for I despise you. When you came into my apartment, you left without something that Mr. Lathrop valued more than he did your beauty. Do you know what it was? It was your dignity. It would be well if you went out and

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searched for it again. I will tell you one thing more, for that you should know—that everybody should know. It is not Mr. Lathrop's money that provides this house, buys my dresses, and supports me: it is my own. It was my father's; it is now mine. For the rest, I shall not argue with you. Such a thing would be to insult myself. Oh, no! The shame is yours, not mine. At first, I was sorry for you, and I would have forgiven—but not now! You have gone too far. At first, I would have done all that I could to reunite you with Morris, for I love him, and I would see him happy. But it would not be for his happiness to unite with you; it would be to his despair. No, I would not have him make you his wife, now; it would not be well. You are not a good woman.”

Her words came so fast, so impetuously, that Carla could do nothing but stand and listen to them. She tried several

THE ACCUSATION

times to interrupt the torrent of rebuke that fell from 'Rita's lips, but she could not succeed. There was something in the manner of the girl that overawed her, that silenced her, that compelled her to listen, even against her will.

Neither of them had heard the doorbell, although it rang sharply while 'Rita was speaking. Now, as Carla opened her lips to reply, the portières were thrust apart, and Morris Lathrop stepped quickly into the room, and paused, overcome by astonishment to see these two together.

XV

DRIVEN BACK TO EDEN

BOTH Carla and Clarita discovered Lathrop's presence at the same moment, but the discovery affected them very differently. To Clarita, his coming was a godsend; to Carla, it was only a confirmation of her worst suspicions. The former uttered a glad cry of welcome; the latter smiled contemptuously.

Lathrop looked from one to the other, in unqualified amazement. He could not understand Carla's presence there. At first, the hope shot through him that she had repented of her hasty judgment, and had come to see for herself what manner of woman it was concerning whom she had questioned him—that she had come repentantly. One glance, however, was

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sufficient to dispel that illusion; the attitude of the two was obviously hostile.

But the young man concealed his dismay as best he could.

"Good-evening, Carla," he said, quietly. "It is a surprise to see you here. Why don't you sit down?"

"Are the apartment and the furniture yours, that you are so quick to place them at my service?" the girl retorted, her lip curling.

"Should I be infringing upon your hospitality if I requested a lady to take a seat in your drawing-room?" he asked in return, speaking as calmly as before.

Then, he turned to 'Rita, in whose face traces of her recent excitement were still plainly to be seen, although her anger was forgotten since the moment of his coming.

"What is the trouble, 'Rita," he said. "Is anything wrong?"

"Everything seems to be wrong, Morris—everything!" was the passionate

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reply. "I don't know what it is; I don't know what is the matter, but it is terrible! Miss Trevor came in unannounced; she has been very unkind—very unjust! Ask her. Perhaps, she will tell you—I cannot!"

She turned away and walked to the window, crying silently, for her overwrought nerves, so sorely tried by the two scenes through which she had passed, could no longer bear the strain, and, now that this man in whom she had perfect trust was come to defend her, she at last broke down.

Carla did not wait for questions. She seemed to have thrown all sense of discretion aside. She believed that Lathrop had admitted himself with a key, for she had not heard the bell, and in that moment she hated him as intensely as she had loved him in the past.

"Do you wish me to repeat to you what I have already said to this woman?" she

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demanded coldly, yet with such suppressed wrath that it robbed her voice of its clearness and rendered it husky and unnatural.

"Carla, hush!" Lathrop exclaimed, warningly.

"I will not hush!" the frantic girl stormed. "Why should I? I only half-believed it before; I know it now. I saw you when you left this house in the company of my father. You have returned; you enter the room with the air of a master—you are master here! Do I need a greater assurance?"

With a slow gesture, she turned then, and pointed one finger at Clarita.

"She has not denied it," she continued. "She could not—she dare not, for it is the truth! When I accused her of it, she could only cower, like the guilty thing she is. She could not say, no! Oh, she loves you—yes, she admits that much. I do not doubt that she will continue to lavish

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her love upon you, such as it is, until she finds another who has more money to give her, or who wins her fancy for the moment. Why, she thinks, now our engagement is broken; that you will make her your wife, that you will—”

“It is false, Morris! Do not believe her!” cried Rita, whirling and facing them. Her cheeks were flaming red, and her eyes shone like stars. To have the love she had striven so hard to conceal, revealed in that wanton manner was to her the climax of disaster. So long as the accusations made against her were untrue, she could bear them, but, when the holiest truth of her life was thus cried abroad, it was more than she could bear, and she stood there trembling, not knowing which way to turn, utterly bereft.

Lathrop stepped to her side instantly, and gently put an arm around her. She nestled close to him, and grew calmer. Then, very quietly, but very firmly, he

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spoke; and his face wore the smile that it had shown when he struck down Chapman in the billiard-room of the club.

“Carla,” he said, “you have decided for me a question that I should have settled for myself long ago. I cannot understand what actuates you to-night. You have said things and done things which may be forgiven, but which can never be forgotten. I regret particularly that it is you who have said them, for the day will come when you must repent them with much more bitterness than you use in giving utterance to them now.”

Carla smiled, disdainfully.

“You mean, I suppose, that my repentance will come too late,” she said. “I have said nothing that I regret—nothing! I am sorry that I came here, for you have exhibited a depth of degradation of which I had not believed you capable, and I regret such a spectacle. As for her—”

THE THREE KEYS

"Stop, Carla!" Lathrop commanded, sternly. "Even from you, I will listen to no more. If you have no consideration for others, recall some of your own self-respect—and go!"

"You—order me out—like that?" the girl exclaimed, aghast at the extremity to which she had forced herself.

"I do not order you out," Lathrop rejoined. "I have neither the inclination nor the right to do so, but it is best for you, and best for all concerned that you do go, and at once. Your presence has already worked harm enough to us all. So, go, please. I ask it for your father's sake, for Edna's sake, for your own—not for 'Rita's or for mine. You cannot injure me, and I can and will protect her."

"By giving her your name, I suppose," Carla suggested, maliciously. "It would be a fitting end."

"Yes, by giving her my name, if she

DRIVEN BACK TO EDEN

will accept it," Lathrop agreed, and his voice was tender.

For a moment, there was silence. Then, Carla spoke, falteringly:

"I—will go."

She did not deign another word, but, with head erect, crossed the room, and disappeared through the portières.

Lathrop still stood with one of his arms around 'Rita. For a little, after Carla had left the room, both continued silent. Presently, however, the young man looked down at the face on his breast and saw that the girl was crying silently.

"'Rita," he said, softly, "is it true?"

"Is what true, Morris," she murmured.

"Is it true that you love me?"

"Yes," she whispered, "it is true. I love you, I have always loved you, Morris, and I always shall love you."

"And to-morrow morning, dear, will you stand before a minister, here in this

THE THREE KEYS

place and say the words that will make you my wife?"

She broke away from him and fled to the other side of the room, where, with a table between them, she stood panting, frightened, wondering.

"No—no—no!" she cried. "Not that! I could not do it. It is not possible. It would not be right. It would be a sin."

"Why, 'Rita?" he asked. "If you love me, why do you refuse to be my wife?"

"Because—you do not—love me!" she replied, slowly.

"That is not true," he declared, with great earnestness. "I do love you, with all my heart."

But she shook her head.

"You do not love me," she repeated. "I am very dear to you—I know that, and I thank God for it—but you do not love me! You have given all your love to Miss Trevor, and you cannot take it away in a moment, and bestow it upon me.

DRIVEN BACK TO EDEN

Hush! Do not speak," she went on, "for I am not strong against you. Let me complete what I have to say. You offer to make me your wife, because of what has happened here, because you regard it as your duty, because it will forever put an end to the slanders which were provoked by my visit to your rooms. If you loved me, I would fly to your arms. As it is, no! I cannot, I cannot be your wife."

"'Rita," Lathrop said, stretching out his hands toward her, "come here. You need not run away from me, for you are altogether wrong. I do love you! I had determined to ask you to be my wife while I was on the way back here after taking Mr. Trevor home—long before I had any idea that Carla was here. You certainly believe me now, do you not?"

"Yes," the girl admitted. "You have never deceived me—I do not doubt you now."

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"Then, you will consent!" Lathrop cried, joyously.

But the girl shook her head in denial.

"No, no; I cannot!" she persisted. "You must not ask it of me."

"But I do ask it, dear," Lathrop urged. "It is for my own happiness that I plead. You will do this to make me happy, will you not? . . . Listen: To-morrow, I shall bring two of my friends here, and in their presence we shall be married. As quickly as I can, I shall finish up the business that detains me in town. When that is arranged, we shall go abroad. We shall travel where we please, and for as long as we please. Afterward, we shall choose a home as our fancy guides us. You will not refuse me, 'Rita? To-morrow, at twelve o'clock, I shall be here. You will be ready, dear?"

The girl's eyes were moist as she gazed up at him, but, for a little, she made no reply; indeed, she could not speak just

DRIVEN BACK TO EDEN

then. Her whole heart went out to him, and yet—there was something wanting. Had he seized her in his arms; had he whispered words of endearment, had he covered her face with kisses; had he, instead of pleading, demanded, this hesitation could not have held her in its thrall. But, now, she did not know.

“Say, yes, ‘Rita!’ the lover besought her. “It must be, yes!”

For yet a moment more, the girl wavered. And then, at last, she yielded to the impulse of her own dearest desire. Her head drooped until it was bowed in utter humility before this man whom she worshiped, and, in a voice so low that his eager ears could hardly catch the words, she murmured:

“If you wish it so, Morris—yes!”

CHAPTER XVI

THE LETTER

WHEN Morris Lathrop arrived at his own room that night, after he had won the consent of Clarita to marry him the following morning, he scarcely knew the truth as to his own feelings. He did not realize that his love for Carla had received a shock from which it could never recover, yet he assured himself that he had done right in offering himself to 'Rita, despite the fact that his love for her was a quantity he had never yet paused to analyze. He was conscious of a sense of repose in the arrangement that had been made, and the pain that had been his because of the separation from Carla was gone. He could no longer think of her as hitherto. He remembered

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her now only as he had seen her during that scene in 'Rita's apartment, and he recalled the picture with a shudder.

There was a telegram awaiting him which caused disquieting thought. It came from Jack Millington, and read:

"Correct was good news. Arrive New York to-morrow night, ten. Will keep dark few days in your rooms, if you can put me up. Funny cable from governor. Explain when I see you. Can you meet me at train? J. M."

It was evident that the cryptic phrase, "Funny cable from governor," referred to the hypothecated securities. The news brought Lathrop back with a sudden shock to realization of the dangerous position in which he had placed himself. Nevertheless, he put the message aside, and went to the club, and, as he walked up the avenue, the burden of his thought was: "I wonder if I do right in marrying 'Rita while this peril of disgrace is

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hanging over me?" He could not reply to the question satisfactorily to himself; and, in the end, he shrugged his shoulders, and let it rest. But it was to be answered for him in a manner that he could not foresee.

As soon as he had finished his breakfast the next morning, he set about making arrangements for the event of the day, and started at a rapid walk for the residence of a clergyman of his acquaintance. Before he arrived at the house, however, something compelled him to hesitate. It came to him that he should see 'Rita again before he made any of the necessary arrangements for the wedding. Twice he stopped to turn back, and twice he went on his way again; but, at last, he made the third pause. Thereafter, he did not hesitate, but called a cab, and ordered the driver to take him to the Millington. It was not yet ten o'clock; an early hour for a call, but there was sufficient excuse, for

THE LETTER

he had convinced himself that his only object in the visit was to discover if the girl had not some suggestion to make regarding the ceremony.

The maid who answered his ring announced that her mistress had gone out early to do some shopping. "Madoiselle left a letter for you, sir," she continued. "She expected you, I think, for she told me to give it to you as soon as you came. I will get it for you."

Lathrop passed through the hallway into the parlor, and waited, until the missive was brought. He broke the seal, and read it, after the maid had discreetly retired. As he gathered its purport, his face turned white.

This was the text of the letter:

"I am going away, I know not where; but it is best that I should go, and I obey the mandate of my conscience. It is because I love you, dear, that I go. If I loved you less, I should remain. You

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love me—yes, that I do not doubt; but not as you should love one who becomes your wife. Do not think that I have wantonly deceived you. When I said, ‘yes,’ to you last night, I intended to keep my word; but, almost immediately after you were gone from me, I realized the error that I had committed, and I understood that it could not be as you wished. I think that I love your happiness and your content even more than I love you. Can you understand how that can be?

“If we were married, I should tremble always lest there come a moment of regret into your life for what you had done, and that would kill me.

“You will be worried about my safety. That must not be, for I shall be safe. You remember, there is a column in the *Herald* that you used to laugh about sometimes? If it be necessary, I shall communicate with you by that means; and as soon as it is best. When you have for-

THE LETTER

given Carla, and are reconciled to her, if you will announce it to me in the same manner, I shall return, but not until then—no! It is Carla whom you love.

“I have forgiven her for what she said and did last night. She was beside herself—mad! I, myself, might have done the same, or worse. You should not hold her accountable for it. She loves you. When she lost you, it stole away her reason. Because of that, I freely forgive her, and, if I forgive her, surely you can do the same.

“It is bitter, this going away! To you, it will appear unnecessary, but you do not understand. It is not from you that I fly; it is from myself! God bless you and keep you, dear, and remember that I love you!”

Lathrop read the letter through twice. Then, he folded it carefully, and put it in his pocket-book. Presently, he walked to a window, and stood for a long time look-

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ing out upon the street. When he turned, he rang the bell for the maid.

"Your mistress writes," he said, without showing any emotion, "that she may accept an invitation to spend several days with a friend, in another city. She probably had not fully decided when she went out, or she would have told you. So, if she does not return, you will understand."

He went out then, got into his cab, and was driven to the office of George Trevor.

"Come in, come in," said the broker, when he saw him. "I want to talk to you. You are late!"

"I could not very well help it, pater. What is it? Anything new?"

"No. I want to talk to you about—last night. I must talk to someone, or I shall go mad. And you are the only one to whom I can speak."

"Then, let us leave it until evening," Lathrop suggested. "Here, we are

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likely to be interrupted. I'll come to you at your house, after dinner."

"Very well," the financier agreed. Then, he added reflectively: "You need not mind coming to the house on Carla's account. She has gone away."

"Gone away!" Lathrop repeated, astonished. "Where?"

"To Lakewood," was the answer. "At least, I found a note on the breakfast-table, telling me that she had gone."

At this moment, the conference of the two was interrupted by a clerk, who entered with a card. The financier glanced at it, and read aloud the name, "Harry Chapman."

"Very well," he directed. "Send him in."

There was another private room, at the back of that usually occupied by the broker, and, when the clerk had gone out, Lathrop rose and went into it.

"I am the bearer of bad news, Mr.

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Trevor," Chapman announced, as he came into the presence of the financier. "Your daughter, Carla, has met with an accident. She—"

"She is not dead!" the old man exclaimed, his face ghastly.

"No, no, sir," Chapman replied, quickly. "I regret that I must tell you of this. I was present when it occurred, and I did all that I could to give assistance. Then, I hurried here. She was conscious when I came away. The physician told me that, if there was no internal injury, she would recover."

"Where was it? How did it happen?" the financier questioned.

"At the American Line pier, where she had gone to see about her room for the voyage. She was knocked down by a team of truck horses. But her injury is not serious."

"American Line pier—voyage?" spluttered Trevor, not comprehending in the

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least. "What the devil do you mean?"

"She was to sail to-day, you know," Chapman answered, in astonishment. "I met Miss Trevor last night, as she was coming out of the Millington on Central Park West, and I escorted her home. She told me then that she intended to sail to-day, but that you had neglected to procure her tickets. I volunteered to attend to it for her—"

"Coming out of the Millington!" exclaimed the broker, heeding nothing else that Chapman was saying. "What time was that?"

"About ten o'clock—perhaps a little after," Chapman replied.

"Good God! What was she doing there?" came the imperative question.

"She had been calling on a friend, I suppose," was the wondering answer. "I did not ask her!"

"Morris! Morris!" Trevor called.

Lathrop stepped into the room, but he

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did not turn his eyes in Chapman's direction.

Chapman, smiling cynically, said:

"Mr. Lathrop can inform you as to whom she called upon, for he also was there."

Then, he turned abruptly, and left the office.

CHAPTER XVII

FACE TO FACE WITH CONSEQUENCES

“COME, pater,” said Morris instantly, speaking before Chapman was fairly out of the room. “We’ll do our talking while on the way.” When they were seated in the carriage, he added: “That man Chapman is my evil genius, I verily believe. I had almost forgotten his existence, and now it appears that he has been spying upon me all the time. I’ll tell you whatever there is to tell. ‘Rita came to my room one day to see me. Carla heard of it. Later, she heard other things, and she asked me to explain. Because I would not tell ‘Rita’s history, she broke the engagement. Last night, after we left ‘Rita, she called at the Millington. She was there when I returned.

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It seems that she met Chapman as she went away."

"But why did she go to see 'Rita? Those two together!" the financier exclaimed. "Ah! If they had only known!"

The younger man placed one hand on his companion's knee, and, gazing earnestly into his face, said sternly:

"Pater, neither Carla nor Edna shall ever know. Promise me that!"

"Why, Morris, why? Why must they never know? 'Rita is their sister—they are all my children. It is not Carla or Edna whom I fear to tell: it is 'Rita. God only knows how I can find the strength to tell her. How shall I ever tell her about her mother?"

"You cannot—you must not—you shall not tell any of them!" Lathrop insisted. "Pater listen to me. There is a chapter of that history connected with your past which you, even, do not know. Silence

FACE TO FACE

is your only safeguard. You must not speak."

"Not yet—not yet, perhaps," the broker agreed. "But Morris, you must surely come to me to-night."

"Yes," Lathrop said, "I shall come to you to-night."

On their arrival at the house, Edna met them in the hall, and, while Trevor hurried to the bedside of his daughter, she told the details of the accident to Lathrop. It appeared that the injury was not, after all, very serious. Carla's left arm had been broken, and she was suffering from shock, mental as well as physical, but the physicians predicted a speedy recovery. When he had received this information, Lathrop hurried away, and went directly to the offices of the *Herald*, where he wrote an advertisement for insertion in the personal column, to this effect:

"'Rita: It is most important that you should return home at once. If you con-

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sider my happiness, you will do this.”

He did not sign the notice, inasmuch as he knew that the girl would instantly know him as the writer of it. He was endeavoring now to analyze the effect, that the rupture with Carla and the flight of Clarita had had upon him. He carried his memory back to the moment when Carla returned the ring to him, and he was moved to wonder that her dismissal of him should have affected him so strongly. In this moment, he perceived that the disappearance of 'Rita was a far greater grief to him. Something of the truth began to reveal itself to his heart. "I have worshiped a masterpiece of sculpture," he mused, "and I have seen it step down from its pedestal, and become common clay. That transformation has changed everything for me." He recalled, too, Chapman's statement as to Carla's meditated departure for Europe, and wondered over this fact. Trevor

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had interrupted the fellow ere the explanation had been completed, but Lathrop readily guessed the truth as to the girl's purpose. Maddened by her own mistakes, after leaving the presence of the one whom she had so bitterly and so unjustly attacked, she had impulsively determined on a far flight. Outwardly calm and self-possessed as always, she had permitted Chapman to observe no sign of her excitement. On the spur of the moment when she encountered him, she had invented her explanation concerning the tickets, and had accepted the readily-proffered aid of this chance-comer. In consequence, Chapman, knowing her intention and commissioned by her to aid in its fulfilment, had met her at the pier to deliver the tickets to her, and had been present when the accident occurred. But there remained the question as to how Chapman had chanced to be at the door of the Millington when she issued from

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the apartment-house. Lathrop believed that the answer to this was simplicity itself: The fellow had been spying on the man who had shamed him. Nevertheless, the ultimate purpose of such espionage remained a matter of mystery.

The restraints that had been imposed upon him, his constant worries and sustained excitements produced their evitable results on the young man who was their victim. At once on his return to his apartment, Lathrop dropped down on a sofa, and fell sound asleep.

When he awoke, it was with a start of dismay, for he realized instantly that he had slept for a long time. A glance at his watch showed him that he was already late for his engagement at the house of Trevor. He sprang to the telephone, and attempted to get the financier on the wire, but the call remained unanswered. He had no time to make further efforts in this direction, for there was before him

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the more vital duty of meeting Jack Millington. Therefore, he hastened to call a cab, and make his way to the Grand Central Station, where he arrived just as the passengers were getting out of the Chicago train. Presently, his friend appeared, and a moment later they were shaking hands cordially.

"The governor is coming over," was the young millionaire's first announcement, when the two men were snugly ensconced in Lathrop's apartment. "He'll be here in three days. It's something about that X. L.—his pet stock. Something's wrong somewhere. It must be straightened out before he gets here, or there'll be the devil to pay!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAN BEHIND THE DOOR

WHAT further might have been said on the subject was interrupted by a ringing of the door-bell, and, while Millington rushed into the room assigned to him, Lathrop went to the door, where he found George Trevor, in a state of perturbation.

"Come in, pater," was the young man's greeting. "I am sorry that I did not keep my appointment with you to-night. I dropped asleep, and, when I awoke, it was too late. I tried to get you over the telephone, but I failed. . . . How is Carla?"

"She is better," Trevor replied. "She is in no danger. . . . But, Morris, I must know—"

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"Wait a minute, please," Lathrop interrupted. "Surely, we do not have to talk business to-night."

"I must talk business to-night," came the impatient answer. "That is what I came here for. It's about that—"

"Oh, yes," the young man broke in again, fearful lest Millington should hear. "It's about that matter between us. Eh?"

The financier regarded Lathrop perplexedly, at the unusual manner displayed by his friend. But, suddenly, an explanation occurred to him.

"Perhaps, you, also, received a message?" he said, tentatively.

Lathrop nodded, since he had not a notion what else to do. He felt that, at all hazards, he must prevent Trevor from referring in words to the X. L. stock, inasmuch as Millington in the adjoining room could hear everything that was said. Nevertheless, he was in honor bound not

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to warn his companion of the presence of a third person in the apartment.

"Well here is mine. Read it," continued the broker, extending an envelope toward Lathrop. "After you have read it, I'll show you my reply, for I did reply. Read it."

The young man took the message from its envelope, and spread it out before him. A glance told him that it was a cablegram. He read:

"Positive information you have block X. L. stock. Where did you get it?"

"SAM MILLINGTON."

"Well?" Lathrop said, as he looked up inquiringly. By a mighty effort, he spoke with the utmost calmness.

"Now, read my reply," the financier directed. "Then, I'll tell you about it. Here it is."

Again, Lathrop read in silence:

"Sam Millington, Paris, France: None of your business. Trevor."

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"What do you think of it?" demanded the older man, smiling grimly.

Lathrop laughed aloud.

"It's to the point," he conceded. "When did you receive the message?"

"That's the devil of it! It came three days ago, and was delivered at the house. Edna received it, and of course forgot all about it. She gave it to me to-night. Now, what does it mean?"

"Whatever it means, pater, it cannot affect you, can it?"

"I'm not so sure about that. It may, mightily. Anyhow, I don't want the stuff on my hands any longer. By the way, did you wire your friend that he could come into the deal?"

"Yes," Lathrop declared; "it is all right, and will be arranged to-morrow."

"I am sorry now that I gave my consent," the financier said, thoughtfully. "But I won't withdraw it. You see,

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Morris, young Millington is very clever—cleverer by far than is Sam himself. Either of them would put up a game on me in a minute, if he could. That cable from Sam makes me believe that some scheme is afoot. . . . Look here, Morris, I want to know just one thing: Is that stock yours, or did you borrow it from Jack Millington?”

Before this crucial question, Lathrop did not hesitate, perceptibly.

“I have never borrowed anything from Jack Millington in my life,” he declared, earnestly. “Does that satisfy you, sir?”

“Perfectly; and it relieves me mightily,” the financier answered, smiling. But, presently, he frowned again. “Where is ‘Rita?’” he demanded, abruptly. “When you failed to come to the house to-night, I went up there, partly to see her, partly in the hope of running across you. I learned that she went away this morning. You know of her absence, for

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the maid told me of your calling there to-day. Where is she, Morris?"

"Why, visiting some of her Spanish friends, I fancy," Lathrop replied, negligently. "Certainly her absence for a day or two is nothing to alarm us."

"Well, perhaps it is not," the broker agreed, dubiously. "But, taken along with the fact of Carla's going there, I felt uneasy over it, though I can hardly tell why." After a little more desultory chat, the old man took his leave.

When he was again alone, Lathrop stood for a time with clenched hands and compressed lips. His face was pale, and his eyes had in them an expression of trouble that was new, for he realized the fact that George Trevor had said sufficient to make Jack Millington cognizant of the whole truth concerning the stolen securities. He had lately ventured to hope that he might keep these things from the knowledge of the young financier; or,

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if they had to be told, that, at least, he himself might have the telling of them. Now, as he believed, Trevor's visit had rendered his situation far more desperate than it had ever been before. The revelation had been made. There remained, then, only to face the result, nor was aught to be gained by postponing the inevitable moment of reckoning.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WHIM OF CUPID

LATHROP turned to the door through which Millington had made his retreat, and called out:

“Jack!”

There was no reply, and he waited for a moment, then called again. Still receiving no answer, he went through the rooms in search, only to find that his guest had disappeared. The fact first astonished him, then troubled him, then pleased him. It was certain that Millington had gone out; there was, therefore, the possibility that he had left ere the vital words of Trevor’s conversation had been spoken. Lathrop returned to the parlor of his suite, and awaited the coming of his friend in a fever of anxiety. Ten

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minutes later, the bell sounded again, and he opened the door to his guest.

"Missed me, did you?" Millington asked, with a smile, as he entered the room, and deposited his bulk in a convenient chair. "Well, I wanted to stretch my legs a bit, you know—they were aching with cramps from the sleeper. So, I hunted up a golfcap of yours out there, let myself out by the other door, and took a stroll around the block. I fancied, too, that the old man might have something private to discuss with you, and, if I'd stayed, I'd have had to hear, which wouldn't have been fair."

Lathrop regarded his friend searchingly, but he made no further reference at this time to the subject uppermost in his thoughts. He derived much comfort from the fact that his guest's manner was as bluff and hearty as ever.

"Jack," he said at last, "there is some-

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thing I want to say to you; or, rather, something I ought to say to you. I do not think that there will ever be a better time than now."

"What is it about? Business?" Milington lazily took his cigar from his mouth, and blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

"Yes."

"Well, I don't want to hear it," was the curt announcement. "Won't hear it, in fact."

"But it is important!" Lathrop urged.

"Bosh! Nothing is important at this time of night. I'm tired of business, and want to forget it for awhile. Besides, there is something not business that I wish to talk about."

Lathrop, despite his firmness of purpose, experienced a thrill of relief. Nevertheless, he made one further effort toward confession.

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"It's about a matter that Trevor and I referred to while I supposed you were in the next room," he said.

"Confound Trevor, and the next room, too!" Millington commented. "I went out, and so didn't hear it, you see. You would have to go over the whole affair, whatever it is. It's too much trouble, now. Besides, I want to talk about something else."

Lathrop permitted himself to be persuaded.

"Very well. What is it?" he questioned, with infinite relief.

"Do you remember the last thing you said to me before I started for Chicago?" came the counter interrogation.

"No. Something about the Cummings affair, wasn't it?"

"It had nothing to do with business; but it has been on my mind ever since. You remember, you made this remark—I can quote the exact words: 'She is not

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for you, unless—' You stopped there, and, when I said, 'Unless what?' you replied that you would tell me after I returned from Chicago. Now, Morris, I have made you think it was the governor's cable sent me home. It wasn't! It was that: I wanted to hear the rest of the sentence."

Lathrop continued silent for so long an interval that the other finally turned to stare curiously at him.

"Well?" he demanded, presently. "Are you going to complete that sentence?"

"Yes, I will complete it," Lathrop answered; "I will complete it as I would have done then. But, Jack, I am not sure I would say the same thing now. If I had completed the sentence at that time, it would have been: 'Unless you want to marry a woman without a past.'"

"Eh? What's that?" Millington exclaimed. Then, he added quickly: "As

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for that, Morris, I'd much rather have one without a past, than with one. But you know about her past, don't you?"

"I have said that she is without one, Jack. It is a matter that cannot be discussed, even between us. I will say only one thing, and that must end all discussions of her. God never made a purer, sweeter, or truer woman than Clarita Ortega."

"That is just the idea I have had ever since I saw her. But, Morris," Millington continued, with a keen glance, "I more than half-believed that you are in love with her yourself."

"I more than half-believed it myself," Lathrop admitted. In the smile which accompanied the words, there was more of sadness than of mirth.

"What? While you are engaged to another?" came the indignant exclamation.

"My engagement with Carla Trevor is

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at an end," Lathrop explained. "It will never be renewed."

Millington uttered an ejaculation of dismay, and his tone, when he spoke, was dismal.

"Look here, Morris," he said. "Are you going to ask Miss Ortega to marry you?"

"I have already done so," was the quiet answer. Millington regarded his host with much disapproval.

"You didn't lose any time, did you?" he remarked; and his voice was bitterly sarcastic. He got up from his chair, and crossed the room to the fireplace where he stood for several moments, silently regarding the glowing coals. Then he returned and calmly resumed his seat.

"When is it coming off?" he asked.

"She has refused me," Morris answered.

"Refused you!" Millington bounded to his feet again, and crossed to the grate once more. Here he turned his back to

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the fire and stood with his feet wide-apart and his hands behind him. When, finally, he broke the silence, his voice was graver than its wont.

"Old man," he said, almost plaintively, "I am going to be downright serious for once. Tell me: Is there any reason why I should not ask Clarita Ortega to be my wife?"

"None," was the ready answer.

"She is, somehow, in your care, isn't she?" Millington continued, curiously.

"Yes," Lathrop replied. "She is really although not legally, my ward. She is a trust that came to me through a peculiar chain of circumstances, which I am not free to explain."

"I do not ask for any explanation," was the prompt retort. "You have told me enough. The fact is, as you must have guessed, that I fell heels over head in love with her, at first sight. Why, I've hardly done anything else since I went to Chicago

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but think of her. I made things hum there, just in order that I might get back here, and ask you to complete that sentence for me. And, now that I've heard it, it is of no importance whatever. What I wish to know is this: Have I your permission to pay my court to her?"

"Jack," Lathrop made reply, speaking with impressive emphasis, "there is not a man whom I would rather see her husband than you—" He hesitated for a moment, and his eyes fell before the shrewd gaze of his friend.

"Except yourself!" Millington cried; and there was bitterness in his voice.

"Leave me out of the question, please," Lathrop rejoined. "There is not a man in whose hands I would so willingly place her future. I do not think that anybody would make a more earnest effort for her happiness, and if you can win her, I shall be the first to say, God bless you both. But you must not permit yourself to in-

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dulge in false hopes. I do not think that 'Rita will ever be your wife. I know that she loves another."

Millington ran one hand around his collar, stroked his moustache, and then asked:

"Is that why she refused you?"

Lathrop hesitated for a little, but, finally, he answered firmly:

"Yes, literally, that is why she refused me."

"Well," Millington declared, "I won't give up until I'm beaten. You have no objection to my calling upon her?"

"No," Lathrop said. "But she went away this morning, without telling me where she was going. She will notify me when she returns, and I shall let you know at once. That is all I can promise."

CHAPTER XX

JACK MILLINGTON'S BUSY DAY

THE following morning, Jack Millington made arrangements for Lathrop to complete the matter of his being let into the copper deal with Trevor; instructed him fully what to do in order to place the million dollars he had promised at the disposal of the broker, and for himself, stated that he would keep close indoors all day.

"You see," he explained, "it won't do for Cummings and that crowd to know that I am back just yet. Besides I want to rest, and, incidentally, to do a little plotting of my own. There are plenty of books to read here. I sha'n't be lonesome."

But Lathrop had been gone less than

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half-an-hour, when Millington rang and ordered a cab. As soon as it came, he entered it, drew the curtains, and directed the driver to take him to the Westmoreland Safety Deposit vaults. There, he entered hurriedly, nodded to the superintendent, passed on through the massive doorway, and went straight to the vault from which Lathrop had taken the securities which he had loaned to Trevor.

"Lucky thing the governor left two keys with me," he muttered. "I'll find out about this thing at once."

He spent nearly half-an-hour in his investigations, then closed and locked the vault again, and started out, carrying a bundle of documents under his arm.

The superintendent stopped him as he was passing.

"Ah, Mr. Millington," he said, "Mr. Lathrop was here one day while you were gone. He gave me a letter for you."

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"Well, what of it?" came the brusque query.

"I merely wanted your assurance that it was all right, sir."

"Certainly it was all right," Millington retorted testily. "What the devil would I give him the letter for, if it were not all right? By the way, where is that letter?"

"On my file, sir."

"Well, let me have it. I want to preserve it with some other papers."

Five minutes later, with the letter in his pocket, Millington reëntered the cab, and had himself driven to the Millington, where he took the elevator to the second floor, and rang the bell of Clarita's apartment.

When the maid opened the door, he stepped quickly inside. As he did so, he was sure that he heard the rustle of garments, as of someone scurrying away.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked.

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"She is away, sir," the maid answered, somewhat disturbed by the visitor's imperious manner.

"Do you know where I could send a letter so that she would receive it?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know when she will return?"

"No, sir."

"Well," Millington remarked, after a deliberative pause, "can you give me a sheet of paper and an envelope? I'll leave a note for her." He slipped a bill into Marie's hand, and walked into the parlor, where the girl presently brought him writing materials.

"There," he said, when he had written and sealed the note, "when your mistress returns, give her that." Without another word, he rose, and passed out of the house, and was soon rapidly driven toward Lathrop's apartment.

For some reason, young Millington seemed to be very greatly pleased with

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himself. There was a smile on his face, and he chuckled audibly several times during the ride.

"Smart girl, that," he muttered aloud, "But not smart enough to fool me; not quite! Caught on in a minute! Clever though — deucedly clever! One thing's certain. I must look somewhere else for a wife. But, after all, I guess I'm not so hard bit but what I can get over it. Whew! Morris has got himself into a mess all around, and — good God!"

As he looked from the window of the cab his glance had fallen upon no less a personage than his own father, who was quietly strolling along the street.

"Foxy old duffer!" continued Millington, as he drove on. "Left those cables to be sent when he was three or four days out — probably sent a half-a-dozen others, too. Fooled the whole Street. Good heavens! He'll have his claws on Morris, if I don't do something to interfere. Maybe it

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would have been better if I had let him know that I did hear what Trevor said last night."

The cab came to a stop just then, and bidding the driver wait for him, Millington darted into the house, and up the single flight of stairs. As he reached the landing, he collided with a lady.

"Beg pardon!" he exclaimed, drawing back. Then he started. "Hello!" he continued. "I'm blessed if it isn't little Edna Trevor—leastwise, you were little when I saw you last."

"Well, I'm grown up now, Jack Millington," was the spirited retort, and the girl tossed her head defiantly.

"So you are, to be sure. Well, I'm glad to see you. You're just the person I want. Come in here." Without more ado, he hurried the girl to Lathrop's door, unlocked it, and thrust her inside. Then he closed the door with a bang.

"Do you think that this is exactly the

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proper thing to do, Mr. Millington?" Edna asked, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

"Bother propriety!" Millington exclaimed. "I've got something a heap more important to think of than that, just now. Look here, Edna: You and Morris are friends, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?" the girl questioned, completely mystified by the young man's manner and words. "Certainly, we are."

"Well," Millington continued, speaking very rapidly, "are you willing to devote your afternoon to keeping him out of a scrape? It's uncommonly serious, Edna, and I am in dead-earnest about this."

"I can see that you are," the girl agreed, with a smile. "What is it all about?"

"I haven't time to explain now," was the reply. "You must follow my directions, and you will understand everything a little

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later. I have a cab at the door. You must take it, and drive to your father's office. You'll find Morris there. When you get him bring him here."

"Shall I tell him that you are here, Jack?" Edna asked. She had already absorbed the contagion of Millington's excitement, and her volatile nature was aglow with eagerness to undertake this bewildering adventure.

"Yes, yes," the plotter cried, with enthusiasm at the suggestion. "That's the idea! Tell him, I have met with an accident, been run over by an automobile. I'll have an ambulance outside, and two or three doctors in attendance. He'll come fast enough, if he thinks that I am in any danger. You must make me out as almost dead."

"But how am I supposed to know all about this?" Edna queried.

"Oh, you saw the accident. You were there when they picked me up. You were

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the only one who knew me, and had me brought here. Bring him here as soon as ever you can. Look here, Edna, I'll tell you this much: My governor has got home. If once he gets his clutches on Morris, he'll send him to jail."

"Send Morris to prison?" cried Edna.

"Good Lord! What have I said? Anyhow if you don't get him out of that office and away from that part of the city inside of an hour, he will be ruined. Can you do it, Edna?"

"I can do it, and I will do it!" the girl declared, firmly. "But suppose I can't find him?"

"You must find him! Follow him all over the city, but get him."

"Shall I tell him that your father is in the city, and that there is danger of—?"

"No, no; not for the world!" Millington commanded. "Just bring him here. Don't on my account, let him go elsewhere." While speaking, the young man

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had thrown open the door, and now, without another word exchanged between them, the girl hurried forth on her mission of salvation.

CHAPTER XXI

SAM MILLINGTON'S LITTLE SCHEME

OLD Sam Millington had arrived in the city, on a French line steamship, about three o'clock that same morning. He had traveled across the ocean incognito, and had, as his son shrewdly guessed, left the cable-message in Paris to be forwarded several days after his departure, in order that he might arrive in New York much sooner than he would naturally be expected. He had received reliable information that George Trevor had hypothecated a large block of X. L. stock with the bank with which he did business, and, inasmuch as he believed that he knew accurately where every share of the stock was located, he had been greatly puzzled and troubled by the news.

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He was intensely angry as well, and, the more he thought of the matter, the angrier he became, so that, finally, he determined to cut short his visit abroad, and, returning quietly, to investigate the matter for himself. First, however, he had made the submarine wires warm with messages, and for some time half-a-dozen detectives had been investigating in his behalf. In that work, they had been materially assisted by Henry Chapman, who had been old Milington's principal informant. From the evidence he had received, the wily old capitalist drew his conclusions; and these covered the essential facts of the whole transaction.

He went ashore as early as he could, and was driven at once to an uptown club where he had wired Chapman to meet him. Then, after a long talk, during which everything was accurately planned, the capitalist started down-town. He had

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left the club-house and was getting into a cab when his son saw him. He was driven at once to the Westmoreland Safe-Deposit vaults, and it so happened that the superintendent with whom Jack Millington had talked this same morning was, at the moment, off duty, so that the old man heard nothing of his son's visit there. He passed through the grating, opened his vault, and discovered at a glance that every scrap of the X. L. stock was missing—three or four times the amount he believed Lathrop had taken—and he became proportionately angrier. He closed the door with a bang, and hastened to the nearest magistrate, before whom he swore out a warrant. Then, accompanied by an officer in citizen's clothes, he returned to the Westmoreland.

“Do you know Mr. Morris Lathrop?” inquired the capitalist of the assistant superintendent, who was in charge.

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"Yes, sir."

"He will come here to-day. He has been here before, hasn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, he'll come again to-day—as soon as he finds out that I am in the city; and I shall very soon have him informed of the fact. When he comes admit him inside the grating, and let this man follow him in."

"Very well, sir," the official promised; "it shall be done."

"And you," Millington continued, turning to the officer, "will wait until he has the door of the vault open before you serve your warrant. The minute that you see him coming, call up 75,346 Cortlandt, and say, 'Stock's booming'! afterward, keep him till I get here. I want my instructions carried out to the letter."

He went out then, got into his cab, and was driven away. Fifteen minutes later, he walked into Trevor's office, with that

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alert, imperative manner that was characteristic of him, and pushed his way, unannounced, into the presence of the broker, who was engaged in an animated conversation with Morris Lathrop. Both men looked up quickly when he entered, but neither showed the amazement he felt. One had passed through many years of training in the surprises of the Street; the other had himself under perfect control.

"How are you, Trevor?" exclaimed the capitalist, in exactly the same manner he would have said the words had he been in the habit of dropping in every day at the same hour. "Good morning, Lathrop. Just got back this morning! Well, Trevor, did you get my cable?"

"Yes; and answered it," was the retort.

"I didn't get the reply," Millington said. "No matter, though. I see you're busy now. What time this afternoon can I see you?"

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"Any time," Trevor said, amiably. "I'm here till four."

"All right, I'll run in. Are you a new recruit in the Street, Lathrop?" the capitalist continued, turning his crafty eyes on the young man.

"Oh, yes, of sorts," Lathrop replied, carelessly, as he drummed his fingers on a packet wrapped in brown paper, which he was holding. "Did you have a pleasant voyage over, Mr. Millington?"

"Oh, delightful. Never better! I suppose Jack is out of town, isn't he?"

"I received a wire from him, from Chicago, day before yesterday," Lathrop answered, in a neutral voice.

"Well, he'll get one from me to-day. So long! See you later, Trevor." The capitalist went out as briskly as he had entered, but there was an enigmatical smile on his face as he muttered:

"Good stuff in that fellow. Cool as a cucumber! Pity to put stripes on him,

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but it can't be helped. I suspect that Trevor put him up to it. The old fool ought to have known that I'd find it out. I only hope I can prove that he did know about it. I'd like to send him along to keep Lathrop company!"

"Now, what did Millington mean by running in here in that way?" Trevor demanded, as soon as the capitalist had left the office.

"Probably, to question you about this stock," Lathrop replied, tapping the packet again. "He found me here, and put it off till later."

"He means mischief, somewhere," the financier mused. "I've seen that glint in his eyes before, and it always means trouble for somebody. I suppose it's Jack that he's after this time. Anyhow, we are safe."

Lathrop made no direct reply, but regarded the parcel fondly.

"I'll hurry along, now," he said, after a

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moment. "You don't need this again, since you have Jack's million and the promise of more if you want it."

"No," Trevor declared. "And I'm more glad than I can tell you to get that stock off my hands."

Lathrop went out then, entered his cab, and gave directions that he be driven to the Westmoreland Safe Deposit Company. He did not see the face of Sam Millington peering at him from a window on the opposite side of the street.

His cab had just turned the corner into Broadway when the one containing Edna dashed up to her father's office. She opened the door, and sprang out almost before the vehicle came to a stop, hastened inside, and gave her father a second shock of surprise.

"Where is Morris?" she demanded, before the broker could speak.

"Just gone out; not a minute ago. What is the matter?"

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"Nothing. Where has he gone?"

"Is Carla—?"

"Carla is all right—everything is all right. But I wish to see Morris. Where did he go?"

"He went from here to the Westmoreland Safe Deposit Company," the father answered. "What do you—?"

"Where is that? Quick! I want to catch him," Edna interrupted.

"Broadway, near Chambers Street. What in the world—?"

But the girl was gone before he could complete the sentence.

"Westmoreland Safe-Deposit—Broadway, near Chambers," she was saying to her driver. "Drive as fast as you can;" and she was whirled away.

As she darted out of her cab, she saw Lathrop in the act of entering the door, and she called to him. He did not hear, so she started on a run after him. She remembered afterward that several men

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were there, and that one of them was in the act of hanging up the telephone-receiver. Now, however, she gave no thought to aught beside her errand.

"Morris!" she cried, shrilly.

At the sound of the girl's excited voice, Lathrop wheeled.

"Edna!" he exclaimed. "What is it? What has happened? What is the matter?"

She was almost breathless, and what she said between gasps seemed to paralyze all present with astonishment.

"Jack Millington—he's dying—run over by an automobile—taken to your rooms—he wants you—come with me at once—he may not live until you get there!"

In her excitement, which was as real as if young Millington had indeed been on the point of breathing his last, she seized Lathrop by the arm, and fairly dragged him through the door.

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"There's not a moment to lose," she panted. "Your horse is fresher than mine. Come!" She dashed into his hansom, leaving him to follow.

"My rooms! Drive for your life!" Morris called to the driver, and the cab rolled away.

Back in the office of the safe-deposit company, three men gazed at one another in astonishment, from which they did not recover until the hansom containing Lathrop and Edna was far on its way uptown. Then, one of them sprang to the telephone, and called excitedly for 75,346 Cortlandt.

"Mr. Millington there?" he asked as soon as the connection was made.

"Just left for the Westmoreland Safe-Deposit," came the reply; whereat the man hung up the receiver—and waited. There was nothing else to do.

Within the cab, Edna was sobbing violently—so violently that she was totally

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unable to reply to the questions Lathrop addressed to her. Her emotion was partly assumed, but, too, partly real, for she was now hysterical from the excitement of the part she had played, and she believed that, in overtaking Lathrop as she had, she had saved him from prison. Nevertheless, she still strove to enact her rôle.

“Oh, Morris,” she gasped, following Millington’s instructions, “I saw the accident. It was terrible! I was the only one who knew him. Your rooms were nearest. I didn’t know where else to take him. He was conscious all the time. He wanted you.” These sentences were uttered at intervals, and not another word could Lathrop get from her. She laid her head upon his shoulder, and continued to sob as though her heart would break.

When they reached the house, there was an ambulance at the door, and, as they got out of the hansom, it started away

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briskly. It had been called by the plotter, and the surgeon had been liberally feed to play his part; as had the hall-boys, and the attendant in the elevator. Lathrop, however, did not pause to question any of these. Instead, with Edna following closely behind him, he leaped up the stairs, two steps at a time. But the girl was smiling through her tears now, for, somehow, she felt that, when he was once within his room, in the presence of Millington, he must be safe.

The door of the suite was open, and the parlor had been darkened. Two men who had the appearance of physicians stood there. The odors of carbolic acid and of iodoform were in the air. Not a detail had been omitted from the *mise-en-scène*.

"Is he alive?" Lathrop demanded, as he darted into the room.

"Yes, he is alive," one of the men made answer. He pointed toward the door and Morris hastened to enter.

CHAPTER XXII

LATHROP'S CONFESSION

JACK MILLINGTON knew the man with whom he had to deal, and he had been careful to prepare every detail in strict accordance with the conditions that would have existed if, in reality, he had been injured unto death. Therefore, when Lathrop entered the room, he found his friend stretched upon the bed, swathed in bandages, and presenting every appearance of one most severely afflicted. Had Millington revealed himself in the enjoyment of the perfect health which he actually possessed, Lathrop's anger at the hoax played on him must have rendered him totally unmanageable, so there could have been no possibility of rendering him

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the intended service. Millington, with this fact in mind, played his part cunningly, convinced that the necessary explanations must be made before the fraud was discovered, else the plot of rescue would prove a failure. Neither of the two men, for the time being, gave a thought to Edna, who had thrown herself on a chair in the parlor, and there dissolved in tears. The girl continued to weep quietly until fragments of the conversation in the next room came to her ears, when she dismissed all scruples concerning eavesdropping, and listened intently, forgetting to weep.

Lathrop went at once to the bedside of his friend, and, drawing a chair close, murmured brokenly:

"Dear old chap! I left you so strong and well this morning and now—"

"It's not so bad as the physicians think it is, Morris," Millington declared, in a

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voice which he strove to make weak and quavering. "I'll pull through all right. Don't worry about me."

"Ought you to talk, Jack?" Lathrop questioned, anxiously.

"Talk? Yes!" was the querulous retort. "What else is there to do? Besides, I must talk. There's something important to talk about. You see, when this thing first happened, I thought I was going off the hooks, and I couldn't do that without telling you something that was on my mind. I owe you an apology, old man, and I wanted to make it before I shuffled off."

Lathrop stared bewilderingly at his friend.

"Owe me an apology? I don't know what it can be about, and it doesn't matter. I owe you more than that, for I owe you a confession. I have done you a grievous wrong, Jack. Do you think you are strong enough to hear me?"

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"Strong enough? Yes," Millington answered. "But, first, let me make my apology. Maybe, it will make your confession easier. I lied to you last night, Morris."

"Lied to me! What about?"

"About that conversation you had with Trevor. I heard every word of it."

"Ah!" Lathrop's face whitened, but he regarded his friend unflinchingly.

"I did, old man," Millington went on. "Of course, I couldn't quite understand, although I think I made a pretty good guess about it. After you were gone this morning, I went down to the Westmoreland, and investigated. Then, I came uptown again, and on the street I spied the governor. I knew, of course, that he had it in for somebody, and that you were undoubtedly the man. Next, I ran into a motor-car—and you know the rest. What have you there in that package?"

Lathrop had forgotten that he still held

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the packet of stock in his left hand. He was dazed by what his friend had just said, but, at the same time, he was conscious of a sense of infinite relief that the secret was out at last. He made no effort at avoidance or equivocation, but spoke immediately and in an unfaltering voice:

"I have the X. L. stock that I stole from your father's vault at the Westmoreland with the aid of the key that you left in my keeping. What is more, I was only able to get it back to-day, because of the million dollars that you put in the copper-deal through me this morning."

"That's just what I thought," Millington exclaimed. "Now, before you say another word, I want you to do just as I tell you. Give me a sip of that medicine in the tumbler on the table. The doctor said I could talk all I wanted to, if I'd taste of that once in a while. Thank you! Now, feel under the pillow on the other side of the bed. Have you got it?"

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"A package? Yes."

"Open it. What do you find?" Millington demanded.

Lathrop uttered an exclamation of surprise, for he held in his hand a bundle of certificates of the same stock that was in his own packet. But he controlled his emotion, and replied, evenly:

"More of the kind of stock that I stole."

"Precisely!" Millington agreed. "Give me another sip of that medicine. Thanks! Now, open the package that you brought with you, and put all of the stock together. Then, tie it up in the paper that was under the pillow. Do as I tell you; don't stand there, gaping. I'm likely to have another hemorrhage at any minute, and I don't want to peg out until I get through with you."

Lathrop obeyed without a word, for he feared the effect of opposition or excitement upon his injured friend. He glanced vaguely in the direction of the

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door that connected the room with the adjoining one, and Millington, correctly interpreting the glance, said:

"I told them all to go out and walk around the block when you came in. There is nobody there." Again, he forgot Edna. "Have you got the package tied up?" he added.

"Yes."

"Good! Put it under the pillow again. Wad that old paper up, and chuck it into a corner; and then come around here, and sit down. Now, what is that confession of yours?"

"There is no more to it, Jack. I deliberately, and with premeditation, robbed your father's safe of seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of X. L. stock. I stole it as any other thief would have done. For God's sake, isn't that enough?"

"No," the pseudo-invalid declared, with conviction. "Why did you steal it? You

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seem to like the word, so I'll use it. Why did you steal it?"

Lathrop hesitated, and, while he did so, a ring of the electric bell announced a new arrival. At the same instant, Edna hastened in upon them.

"There is someone at the door," she said, breathlessly. "What shall I do?"

"Pay no attention to it," replied Millington, who was surprisingly alert for one so severely injured as he was supposed to be. Happily, Lathrop was too much preoccupied to observe the fact, or to heed the presence of Edna Trevor.

"It may be your father," the girl suggested.

"Egad! That's so!" Millington agreed. "Wait a minute, Morris! If that is the governor, you're not to say a word—not a single word about this affair. I'll die in three minutes if you do. Will you promise?"

Lathrop sighed, wearily. "Why not

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make a clean breast of the whole thing at once, and have it over?" he urged.

"I won't have it," Millington commanded, hotly. "When I get through with you, you can do all the confessing you want to, whether I'm dead or alive. By Jove, the governor'll ring that bell off the wall. Let him in, Edna. Pass that medicine, Morris. And mind that you do as I say." He was painfully sipping at the tumbler when his father entered the room.

The agitation of the old capitalist was pathetic. Nobody at that moment could have doubted his great love for his only son.

"Jack! Jack! My boy! My boy!" he cried, and dropped upon his knees beside the bed in a passion of weeping such as only strong men who have not wept for years can exhibit. He had utterly forgotten the X. L. stock. He did not even see Lathrop.

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"Look here, governor, drop it, will you?" exclaimed Jack. "It isn't half so bad as all that; and, besides, I'm not worth it, anyhow." Then, he remembered that he was not supposed to know of his father's presence in town, and he added: "How did you get here?"

"I arrived this morning, Jack," replied the father, brushing aside his tears, and by a strong effort controlling himself. "Where are you hurt? What do the doctors say? Tell me all about it. You seem stronger than I had dared to hope."

"There isn't much to tell, father," was the evasive answer. "I met an automobile on the street, and neither of us turned out. Go and see Randall: he'll tell you all about it."

"Ah, did you have Randall?" the father questioned reassured.

"Yes," the invalid replied. "He can supply you with all the details. . . . Pass that medicine, Morris, please."

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"How do you do, Mr. Lathrop?" said the elder Millington, rising then, and extending his hand, which the young man pretended not to see, as he busied himself with the glass. "I was so agitated when I entered the room that I saw nobody but Jack."

"I think, father," the son argued, "that you had better run up, and get those particulars from Randall. I know you are anxious to have them. Besides, I fancy that I'm getting a bit tired. You can come in again, along toward night."

"Yes, yes; I'll do that," the capitalist agreed. "I'll see Randall at once. I am very glad that it is no worse. I was told that you were dying. Thank God, it was a false report! Good-bye, Jack. I'll run in about six or seven. Good-day, Lathrop. Take good care of my boy. I'll not forget it." A moment later, the door closed behind him.

It would have been a matter of difficulty

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to analyze the conflicting emotions within Jack Millington's breast just then, but the chief of them was shame for having thus imposed on the feelings of his father. Nevertheless, he adhered resolutely to his purpose, and at once addressed his friend sharply.

"Go ahead now, Morris," he ordered. "Why did you steal that stock?"

"I stole it in order to raise money," Lathrop replied, reluctantly.

"For whom?" came the crisp demand. "For yourself?"

"No."

"For Trevor?"

"Yes, if you must know, for the pater," Lathrop faltered. "But, as God is my judge, Jack, he believed that it was mine. It will break his heart when he learns the truth."

"He'd have failed, if you hadn't done this for him, wouldn't he?" Millington asked, after a short pause.

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"Yes."

"When did he tell you that he was on the point of failure? Was it on the night before I started for Chicago?"

"Yes," Lathrop admitted.

Thereafter, Millington lay silent for a little time, musing. When, at last, he spoke again, his voice was markedly languid.

"I suspect that I am getting too tired, Morris," he said, plaintively. "Now, I want you to promise that you will keep this thing a secret until I give you leave to tell. Will you?"

"Yes," Lathrop agreed; "if you will ever give me leave."

"I'll do it within a week," Millington declared. "Now, please send Edna here, while you stay in the other room. I wish to say something to her that you are not to hear. After that, I'll go to sleep for a while."

CHAPTER XXIII

A MATTER OF SCHEMING

“CLOSE the door, please, Edna,” Millington, directed, as the girl entered the room. When she had obeyed, he reached one hand under the pillow where Lathrop had placed the packet, and extended it toward her.

“What am I to do with this?” was her inquiry, as she took the parcel from him.

“I want you to go with it to our house,” Millington explained. “It is empty, you know.” He fumbled for a moment in a pocket, and then produced a latch-key, which he held out. “Take this,” he continued; “it will open the front doors. After you have got in, go up to my room, the front one on the second floor. There, you will find a small iron safe, in a corner.

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Do you understand how to work a combination?"

"Yes," Edna said. "I have charge of the plate-safe, at home."

"Listen, then! Once to the right, to three; twice to the left, to thirteen; twice to the right, to thirty-three; then to the left until it stops." He repeated the combination until the girl had mastered it.

"Next, open the safe, put that package inside, shut the door, and lock it again, and come away. That's all. . . . Can you do that, Edna? But, of course, you can! You must, anyhow. To-morrow, come and tell me how you get along."

"But I am not coming here again, to-morrow," the girl objected, vigorously.

"Oh, you must surely come to-morrow," Millington urged. "I shall have something very important to say to you."

"About Morris?"

"Yes. And about something else, as

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well. Besides, you must return the key to me."

"I can send that to you, Jack," the girl declared. "But I'll do this other errand now, if it is for Morris's sake."

"It is," Millington assured her, "and it is of vital importance to his safety."

With this knowledge compelling her, Edna hurried forth on her mission. But, in the parlor, she was detained for a minute by Lathrop.

"You heard?" he asked. His voice was as calm as ever, but his face was very pale, and showed deep lines of suffering.

"Yes," she admitted gravely; "I heard, Morris."

She hesitated for an instant. Then, as he made no movement, but stood with downcast eyes, she went to him impulsively.

"Morris," she said, placing one slim hand on his shoulder, "you are like a

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brother to me. I want you to kiss me."

"No, no, Edna," Lathrop remonstrated.
"I am not worthy."

But the girl persisted.

"It will make me feel better," she said, simply; "and it—will make you feel better, too. Kiss me please!"

He bent forward then, and pressed his lips to her forehead.

"God bless you, Edna," he said reverently, as she turned to go.

Several times during the hours that followed, Lathrop peered into the chamber where Jack Millington was supposed to be suffering, and each time he thought that his friend was sleeping. After a while, he wrote several letters, and sealed them, for he had determined that he would pay the penalty for his crime—that he would confess his sin to Sam Millington, and abide by the consequences. It was the only way, as he believed, by which he could

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purge his soul of the stain he had put upon it.

Then, at half-past six o'clock, the bell rang, and the capitalist entered the room. If Jack had been, in fact, sleeping, the sound of the bell awakened him. He by no means intended that Lathrop should have any opportunity for conversation with his father, so now he called out loudly:

"Is that you, governor?" Whereupon the old man, after a word of greeting to Lathrop, passed on into the bed-chamber.

"I hope that Randall reassured you," were the first words of his son.

"Oh, yes; he did," was the reply. "How are you feeling now, my boy?"

"Very much better," the son gave assurance. "I'll soon be out again. . . . I fixed everything all right in Chicago. Things there are in a better condition now than ever. And, oh, by the way, there is one thing I nearly forgot! If you should

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happen to go to the Westmoreland—”

“I have already been there,” interrupted the father, his face darkening.

“Have you?” Jack questioned, placidly. “Did you miss the X. L. stock?”

“Yes; all of it! Do you know where it is?”

“Certainly,” came the answer. “Your cable amused me very much. Somebody has been putting up a job on you, governor.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, I mean that you will find your stock in the safe in my room, at the house. I got in from Chicago last night at ten, too late to go to the Westmoreland. It is all in my safe at home.”

For a moment, the old man was too greatly astonished to speak. Then, he said:

“Are you sure? All of it?”

“Yes.”

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"Why did you take it from the safe-deposit company?"

"Thought I might need it. That's what you left the keys with me for, wasn't it? But it occurred to me you might miss it and be worried, particularly when I remembered your long message. I suspect that somebody—Trevor, maybe—started the rumor that got to you."

"I was worried—greatly!" the elder Millington confessed. "What is the combination of your safe, Jack?"

"Three, thirteen, thirty-three," was the reply. "You had better take out the stock, and take it back to the Westmoreland."

"Yes, I'll do so, at once," the capitalist agreed. "You won't need me any more to-night?"

"No," the son answered; "Morris will look out for me. He's better than any trained nurse, for me."

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Sam Millington felt that he owed Lathrop amends for his suspicions, and therefore, as he passed through the parlor, he held out his hand. The young man, however, was raking the fire, and again appeared not to observe the movement.

"Lathrop," the old man said, "I want to express to you my gratitude for your kindness to Jack. If—"

"Pray, do not say a word, Mr. Millington," came the quick interruption. "But there is something that I must say to you of—"

"Morris!" the invalid called from the bedroom.

"In just a moment," Lathrop replied.

"Not a moment!" was the imperious retort. "I want you now! Come here. Go along, father, if you please. You can talk with Lathrop some other time."

At that, the elder Millington hurried away obediently, and Lathrop had no further opportunity for confession.

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"He has gone?" Jack demanded, as his friend approached the bedside.

"Yes," Lathrop answered.

Thereupon, the supposititious invalid uttered a lusty and joyous shout. Then, he gave the bed clothes a kick which sent them swirling across the room, and followed this up by leaping nimbly out of bed into the centre of the chamber, the while Lathrop regarded him with distended eyes.

"Morris Lathrop," he remarked incisively, "you will please control that hateful temper of yours until such time as I shall give you permission to indulge it. Otherwise, you would get Edna Trevor into trouble, and, if you are the man I take you to be, you will not choose to involve that girl."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SECOND RUSE

IT is not necessary to describe at length the hours of bitter mental struggle which took place between Lathrop and Millington when the former discovered that his friend had been shamming all the time, that the physicians, the servants, everybody indeed who was in any way connected with the affair, had been acting under an agreement with the young financier, though none save Edna understood aught as the object to be attained by the deception. Lathrop was very angry at first, but, bit by bit, he was brought to a point where he was able to perceive something of the rather grisly humor in the situation, and, finally, he laughed doubtfully with his friend. But it was by no

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means so easy to prevail on him that he should keep his sin secret. He insisted that he must go to Sam Millington, and make full confession. Thereafter, if the capitalist chose to overlook the matter, he would be content to let it rest.

But Jack was of a different mind.

"Look at the position in which you would place me, and Edna, too," he urged.

"The governor would forgive you, I verily believe; he'd clap you on the shoulder, tell you that you are smarter than lightning, offer you opportunities, and make you a millionaire all over again, in less than no time." For Lathrop had told of his losses, and the entire history of the night when Trevor had sought the loan.

"Now," Millington continued, "I don't think that you ought to profit from my father because of your theft, and yet that is just what you would do, if you went to him with a confession. Oh, yes, indeed, he'd forgive you. But what of me? Do

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you believe, for a moment, that he would ever forgive me for playing this horrible accident game on him? Not much!

"You needn't think that I excuse you," he went on, with stern emphasis. "If you had done the thing for yourself, I'd have helped to put a striped suit on you. As it is, you ought to be punished—I'll admit that, too. But it will punish you more to compel you to lock the thing up in your heart than it would to let you reveal the whole affair to the governor. He'd be proud of you, and the chances are that, before you had been an hour with him, you'd be ass enough to think you had done a fine thing.

"And Edna! If you have any appreciation or chivalry in your soul, you'll hold your peace for her sake, Morris."

Jack Millington had a way of overcoming opposition wherever he met with it, and this case was not an exception. By

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the time that nine o'clock struck, the two men had reached a thorough understanding.

"Now, Morris," Millington said, "I'm going out for an hour or two. I think that you ought to remain here, for the governor might run in, you know. Will you telephone for a cab, while I dress?"

"Where are you going?" Lathrop inquired, as he went to the telephone.

"To get some air," Millington replied, carelessly, "I feel as though I had been on that bed for a week."

But he had another object than fresh air, for, when he entered the cab, he bade the driver take him to the Millington as quickly as possible; and, when he arrived, he went at once to 'Rita's apartment, where he rang the bell.

The maid who opened the door instantly invited him to enter. He passed through the corridor, and on into the parlor, and

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found—as it seemed that he had expected to find—Clarita Ortega, eagerly awaiting him.

“Mr. Millington!” she exclaimed. “I am so glad you have come, at last. I was growing very anxious, although you assured me in the note that you believed it would be all right. You are very late! It is almost ten. What was the danger that threatened Morris? Is he safe? Is there anything that I—?”

Millington held up both hands, laughingly.

“Everything is all right,” he said. “That answers all your questions, at once. So, I was right, eh? You have been here all the time!”

“Yes,” the girl confessed. “I did not go away. I have not left the house at all.”

“I suspected it this morning,” Millington explained. “I heard the swish of your skirts.”

“What was the danger that threatened

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Morris?" Clarita questioned, anxiously.
"Will you tell me?"

But Millington shook his head.

"It isn't necessary, now. It is all over, and he is safe. But there is something else on my mind. Do you remember that evening when I called with Morris?"

"Perfectly," the girl acquiesced.

"Well, I fell in love with you that night," Millington announced.

Rita drew back quickly, and her face paled perceptibly. She could not understand this man. He uttered the words so calmly, his expression was so benign, and he seemed so unconscious of having said anything unusual that she could not take offense.

"I do not understand," she said, with such reserve and dignity that he smiled amusedly.

"Yes," he continued placidly, as though he were discussing, the most commonplace of things; "heels over head, thought about

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you all the time, dreamed about you nights, wrote you letters, and burned them all, came East a week ahead of time on your account. But I've got over it!"

"Oh!" the girl ejaculated, in irrepressible amazement.

"Perhaps, it isn't a very polite thing to say," Millington suggested.

"It is a very pleasant thing for me to hear," Rita retorted, demurely.

"Yes," Millington continued, imperturbably, "I have got over it—that is, over a part of it. I think that I am just as fond of you now as ever; only, it is as a big brother, you know."

The girl nodded and smiled. She had regained a measure of her self-assurance, for she believed that she was coming to understand the man better.

"But, unfortunately," Millington went on, "I was led into making a bad mistake on account of you. When I got back from Chicago, Morris met me, and I went

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to his apartment. There, we got to talking of you. He told me then that you were away on a visit. So, finally, I let him know that I was in love with you, and I asked him, as your guardian, if he had any objection to my suit. He said that he had not. More than this: he is going away, just for the sake of giving me a clear field. He informed me that you had refused him, and he seemed to be sure, too, that you would not take me. Now, in spite of all that, I am going to propose to you, and I want you to accept me!"

"Accept you!" 'Rita exclaimed, in new bewilderment.

"Yes, that is the ideal!" Millington declared, with the utmost complacency. "We shall be engaged for precisely five minutes. Then, at the end of that time, you will tell me that you have changed your mind. You will, in short, break the engagement. I suppose that I ought to explain: It's the only way by which we

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can manage to keep Morris here, and his presence here now is absolutely necessary for his well-being. Will you do this, Miss Ortega?"

The girl, confused by the extraordinary proposition, stared at the energetic plotter mutely. It was her resolve that never, never would she do a thing so strange, so unseemly. Nevertheless, despite her volition, she was swayed by Millington's kindly and masterful air. In the end, she questioned him, reluctantly:

"It will be for only five minutes? You assure me of that?"

"Oh, certainly," Millington replied. "So, now then! Are you ready? Well, will you be my wife? Quick! Answer! Say, yes!"

Before the plotter's urgency, she found herself quite helpless.

"Ye—es," came the stammered answer. At that, Millington laughed aloud.

"I am a schemer, and no mistake!" he

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boasted. He sprang to his feet, seized his hat, and, before Clarita had realized his intention, reached the door. There, he turned, and spoke with triumphant vehemence: "Ah, I have you now, Miss 'Rita. I know that you could never go back on a promise. Morris said that you wouldn't say, yes, to me; but you have. He wants you himself, of course! But I have stolen a march on him. I have you, and—what's more—I'm going to keep you!"

With a cry of fear, the outraged girl leaped to her feet, and started toward him. But he only laughed again mockingly, and darted from the place. Pursuit, she knew, must be useless. Quivering with excitement and wrath, she threw herself down on a sofa, where, for a long time, she lay sobbing.

CHAPTER XXV

CUPID IN HASTE

THE first post of the morning brought the following note to Lathrop:

“Dear Morris,

“I am at home. Something very terrible has happened. I must see you at once. Come to me without fail, the moment you receive this.

“ ‘Rita.’ ”

Millington, who guessed the authorship of the letter, made his friend's obvious perturbation an excuse for questioning, whereupon Morris frankly explained that the writer was 'Rita, and that she was in trouble of some sort.

“In trouble!” Millington exclaimed, in apparent astonishment. “That's curious.

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She was not in any trouble last night."

"Last night," Lathrop repeated, amazed. "Did you see her last night?"

"Yes; I called there," came the cool reply.

Lathrop blushed, angrily.

"May I ask why you waited until this morning before telling me?" he demanded. "You must have known my anxiety!"

"Your anxiety concerning what?" the guest inquired, nonchalantly.

At the question, Lathrop bit his lip with vexation. For the moment, he had forgotten that the other was in ignorance as to the facts concerning Clarita's flight.

"You see," Millington went on, without waiting an answer to his question, "I wanted to keep my great happiness to myself for a little while. You, of course, are the first to be told. The fact is: I asked Rita to be my wife, and she said, yes!"

Lathrop started back as though he had been struck in the face. But, almost on

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the instant, he recovered his poise, and then, very calmly, he held out the letter which he had just received.

"In that case," he said, "it is your place, rather than mine, to answer this appeal."

"No, no!" Millington protested. "The letter is addressed to you. You must answer it. Does she want you to go up and see her?"

"Yes."

"Then, go!" was the concise advice. "Only, wait till the governor has been and gone. I'll have to crawl back into bed again. But, before I do it, I'll just write a short note which I shall ask you to give to Miss 'Rita. And be sure that you don't give it to her until you have had your talk out. Will you do me that favor?"

"Yes," Lathrop agreed, completely mystified.

Millington wrote the letter, and, after repeating the injunction that it should not

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be delivered until after the interview with 'Rita was concluded, gave it to Lathrop. Then, he got back into bed, replaced his bandages, and awaited the coming of his father, who, punctually at nine o'clock, presented himself.

As soon as he was assured that his son was better, he rose to go, saying that he would drop in again in the evening, on his way uptown. Then, he added.

"I found that stock, all right. But the package has been opened."

"Certainly," his son answered, indifferently. "I looked it over. When will you be in this afternoon?"

"Between five and six."

When his father had gone, the bed-ridden patient again threw the clothes off, and leaped forth.

"Now, Morris, hurry!" he urged. "I sha'n't stir out of the house till you return."

Lathrop made no reply until he was

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ready to go. Then, he paused at the door, and said, very slowly:

"I did not offer you my congratulations, Jack; but I do now."

"Oh, they can wait until you get back," Millington answered, with a laugh.

As soon as he was left alone, he rang the messenger-call, and then wrote this note:

"Dear Miss Edna,

"Morris and I wish to see you at once. You did splendidly about the safe, but affairs are not entirely straightened out yet. I must have your consent to one more thing, right away. Please come here at once.

"Jack Millington."

After the messenger-boy had departed with this missive, the young financier took up a position by a window from which he could overlook the avenue, and, for a half-hour, he remained steadfastly watching the thoroughfare. Then, of a sudden, he

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laughed softly to himself, crossed the room, and stood waiting until he heard light footfalls in the corridor, and the bell rang, when, on the instant, he swung the door wide.

"Come in, Edna," he said, gaily. "Morris will be back soon. He was called out for a moment."

"It is not at all right that I should come here in this way," the girl said, entering the parlor, but declining the proffered chair. "No, I won't sit down. I shall stay only a minute."

Millington's manner changed abruptly, and he went on speaking with an extraordinary rapidity and emphasis.

"Well, never mind anything else, just now," he said. "There is only one single thing of real importance, and that is—you! Edna, there isn't a girl like you this side of heaven. Why, if I had you for my wife, with your grit and pluck and goodness, to say nothing of your

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beauty, I'd control railroads from the Atlantic to the Pacific within two years, and I'd have a mortgage on the earth very soon. But, too, I'd have something infinitely better than railroad and mortgages, something better than anything else in the world, for I'd have you. You needn't stand there staring at me as though you thought I had taken leave of my senses. On the contrary, my dear, I've just found them—that God's truth! And you needn't try to think up some ingenious and gentle way of saying, no. I tell you now, I won't take no for an answer. Why, nobody has ever said no to me since I was born, and I sha'n't let a slip of a girl like you begin it—not much! Besides, Edna, you must help me out of this scrape with the governor, you know. It'll never do in the world to let him know how we fooled him, so I've got to go abroad to mend my broken bones—and you must go with me."

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"Have you quite finished?" the girl inquired, tossing her head disdainfully, and trying, with rather poor success, to speak coldly.

"Finished? No, I've just begun," Millington retorted. "Just as soon as you say, yes—"

"I thought you said that was not necessary," Edna interrupted.

"Well, it isn't only just for form's sake, you know," Millington agreed. "But, just as soon as you do say it, I'll send down word, and have my yacht put into commission, and you and I, and Morris and 'Rita—"

"'Rita!" Edna exclaimed, astounded.

"Exactly!" Millington affirmed. "You and I, and Morris and 'Rita, will have a quiet double wedding, and then we'll sail away. Edna, do you know that a man has to be educated in love, as well as in other things? The night before I started for Chicago, I went with Morris to see 'Rita,

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and I thought I had lost my heart to her. It turned out that it was only my head. Then, when I met you yesterday, I knew the difference between the real thing and the imitation. There is nothing dilatory about me, sweetheart—never has been. Why, I made up my mind on the spot!”

“Really, Mr. Millington—” the girl began.

But the ardent suitor continued ruthlessly:

“It’s quite unnecessary for you to use any formula about taking time to consider, and all that. I’ve known you ever since you were a baby, and you’ve known me. I want you. I want you for my wife. I want you to love me always, just as I love you, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” As he ceased speaking, the wooer sprang toward the girl impetuously, and put his arms around her, before she could make a movement of resistance. “Edna! Edna!”

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he murmured. "Don't you understand what this means to me? You won't refuse me, will you, dearest? Say that you will be my wife!" He lifted her face, and looked long into her eyes. The magnetism of the man conquered the scruples of the maiden. When, at last, he bent his head, and laid his lips to hers, the girl's mouth returned the kiss.

CHAPTER XXVI

“THOUGH YOUR SINS BE AS SCARLET”

IN the mean time, Lathrop had found 'Rita in a state of nervous excitement bordering on frenzy. It was evident that she had passed a sleepless night, and that the dawn had brought her no comfort.

“Morris! Morris!” she cried, when he entered the room; and she flew to him, and would have thrown herself upon his breast, had he not repulsed her coldly and sternly. There was an aloofness in the expression of his eyes which caused her to shrink from him with a gasp of pain.

“You have come, at last,” she said then, pitifully.

“I came as soon as it was possible after your letter arrived,” he replied. “What is the trouble? What is there that I can

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do for you? Don't you think it would have been more consistent, if you had sent for Millington?”

She started at that, and regarded him reproachfully.

“He has told you?” she said.

“He has told you that you accepted him—yes. As his promised wife, you should have sent for him, not for me.”

“It is a falsehood!” she cried wildly. “I am not his promised wife! I will never be his wife—never!”

“Have you not promised him you will marry him? Or has he lied to me?”

“I said, yes, to him; but it was a trick—a trick!”

“I confess that I do not understand you, 'Rita,'” Lathrop retorted, with manifest suspicion.

“Morris, let me tell you, in my own way,” the girl pleaded. “I have suffered so, since that morning when—when we were to have been married.”

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"When you ran away?" Lathrop retorted. "Yes, I remember. It is not so very long ago!"

"I did not run away," was the answer. "I was here in the house when you came. I was looking at you from beyond the portières all the time you were here. I have not been out of the house since then. You may ask Edna Trevor,—she knows!"

"Edna Trevor?" Lathrop exclaimed, in astonishment. "How is it that she knows?"

"She came here that morning, soon after you were gone," Rita explained. "At first, my maid would not admit her, but she persisted. I was there, upon the couch, crying, and she came and put her arms around me, and said that she was sorry for what she had said to me the day when we met at your room. And she kissed me, and begged my pardon. And she made me love her, although I wanted to hate her because I thought she loved

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you. She does love you, Morris, but as a sister loves. And, then, I told her all, and she consoled me, and promised me that it would end happily. She made me promise that I would let her tell you about it. She was to tell you yesterday, and I thought that you would come to me at once. But—but you did not come!”

“She did not tell me,” Lathrop said, still coldly.

“Let me finish, Morris,” the girl besought him. “Yesterday, in the forenoon, Mr. Millington came here. I was in the corridor, near the door, when he rang. I fled, but he heard me; and he guessed that I was here. He entered, and in this room he wrote a note, in which he said that you were in great trouble, and that it might be necessary that I should assist him in freeing you from it. Here is the note; you may read it. He said, also, that he would call again in the evening; but it was nearly ten o’clock when he came. Ah! I wish he

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had not come! I wish he had not come here—ever! He told me that you were going away, told me of the conversation that he had had with you concerning me, told me that it was on my account you were going; and he made me believe that, if I would say yes, to his proposal, you would be prevented from going. I do not know how, but he convinced me that it was so. And he promised that the engagement should not continue more than five minutes. Then, when I had said, yes, he sprang up, laughing, and ran away, and I have been half-mad. Morris, oh, tell me! I am not bound by such a promise—a promise secured by a trick! And tell me, Morris: Is it true that you are going away?”

“Yes; I am going away,” Lathrop declared, somberly, “and I shall not return—at least not for a long time. As for you, ’Rita, I think it best that you should marry Jack Millington. He loves you.

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He is an honorable man. He is rich. He can make you very happy. I had no right to ask you to be my wife, when I did so. I have forfeited my honor—my right to ask any good woman to share her life with me. Let me tell you who and what I am, what I was when I asked you to marry me; then, perhaps, you will be glad that I am going away.”

“No, oh, no!” the girl cried, wildly. “Do not say that, Morris!”

“It is true. I am a thief—a common thief! I have stolen. It was from the outward consequences of a theft that Jack Millington has saved me. He was right when he said that I would suffer more in secrecy than in public. If I can no longer respect myself, how can I hope that others will respect me? Do you remember when I wrote you that letter, telling you that I was going away? Where do you think I was going, then? I had determined to take my own life. My fortune was dis-

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sipated, but my honor was untarnished. I thought that I had a right to die. I thought that I loved Carla Trevor, then. It never occurred to me that it was you whom I loved. But I remember now that I possessed the courage to go where she was, to see her for the last time, to look upon her once more; but into your presence I dared not go! I could look upon her, and smile, and keep my secret; but your eyes I avoided. I knew, instinctively, that they would read the truth. I did not realize that it was you whom I loved all the time, until I saw you two together. Then, I knew. But, this morning, 'Rita, when in the midst of self-abasement, standing heart-deep among the fragments of my broken honor, I heard Millington say that you had promised to be his wife, I knew for the first time what anguish is. It came upon me then with all its force and terror. With utter shame, I confess that the wrong I had committed sank into

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insignificance before the greater misery of losing you, of knowing that you were to be the wife of another. And yet, if you were free now, I could not ask you again to be my wife, for that stain is still upon my soul. It can never be washed away.”

He sank upon a chair, and covered his face with his hands! and she went and knelt beside him, looking up into his eyes, pityingly.

“Morris,” she whispered, “dear Morris, do you not remember what the Good Book says, and do you not know that it is true? ‘Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be washed as white as wool.’ I do not know what you mean—I do not know what it is that you have done; but, whatever it is, God will forgive you.”

In the midst of his misery, strangely enough, Lathrop suddenly remembered the note that Millington had sent to 'Rita. Now, he took it from his pocket, and, without raising his eyes, gave it to her. Won-

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deringly, she opened it and read, and then she smiled through her unshed tears.

"Look, Morris! Read!" she said.

Mechanically, he took the note from her, and scanned the words his friend had written:

"My dear 'Rita,

"You must forgive me for the trick I played on you. Never mind now why I did it. Perhaps you will be able to guess when you read this. I release you from your promise. I really don't want you to marry me. In about half-an-hour I am going to ask Edna Trevor to be my wife. But you made me another promise, and that I must hold you to. You agreed to help me save Morris. There is only one way to do it: Marry him!

"Jack Millington."

Lathrop loosened his grasp on the sheet of paper, and it fluttered to the floor. Then, he opened his arms, and the girl nestled into his embrace.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SPECIAL PLEADER

MMORRIS LATHROP and George Trevor stood facing each other in the library of the financier's mansion. The former had just entered the room in obedience to a summons from the broker.

"I came as quickly as I could, pater," Lathrop said, assuming a lightness of tone to disguise his anxiety.

"Is 'Rita with you?" Trevor demanded.

"Yes," was the reply; "she is in the drawing-room, with Edna."

"That is as it should be," the financier declared. "I am determined that she shall know who her father is, and without delay. But there is one thing that must be explained, first. Do you remember what you said in the carriage, the day that Carla

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was hurt? You told me that there was a chapter in my history which I myself did not know. You must tell me what you meant by that remark."

Thus definitely commanded, Lathrop felt himself constrained to obey.

"Before my father died," he said, "he told me a part of the experience which you and he had in Cuba, twenty-five years ago, and he left me a mission to perform. He knew of 'Rita's birth, and he directed me to search for her, and to find her, and always to watch over her as if she were my own sister. He told me as to your marriage to her mother, your separation from her, and the reasons for it. He added that you were ignorant of the fact that she had borne a child. I went to Seville. From there, I traced your child to Cuba, and to the City of Mexico, where I found her. She had been taken and cared for by a distant relative of her mother—a Señor Llorente."

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"Yes, a scoundrel if ever there was one!" Trevor commented. "Go on."

"From him, I learned the whole story—"

"His version of it," the financier interrupted; "but an untrue one, surely. He could not speak truth."

"He gave what seemed to be proofs of the correctness of his tale, and there was one statement which I thought should be kept even from you. This was, that your first wife had died only ten years before, or fifteen years from the present time—that is to say, nearly six years after the birth of Carla!"

The old man raised one hand. He was smiling and unmoved.

"It is not true," he said, calmly. "Carlotta—that was her name—died in my arms, from a wound inflicted by the very weapon that affected me so, the evening when we called upon 'Rita. It was thrown through the open window by the

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hand of an unknown assassin, but, as I believe, by Llorente himself, who loved her, and had been repulsed by her. I think the weapon was aimed at me, but it struck her. She died instantly, without a word. That was two years, nearly, before the mother of Carla and Edna became my wife."

Lathrop was deeply moved.

"If you only knew how I have suffered," he explained, "fearing that you would some day learn this thing which I was led to believe, fearing that Carla and Edna might hear of it. If only I had told you five years ago, pater."

"You already know the reasons for my separation from 'Rita's mother," Trevor continued. "You understand that no blame attached to her. She was jealous; that was all—unjustly so, but it was Llorente's work. She left me, and returned to her home in Spain. I followed her there. Our interview had just com-

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menced; she had not told me of the child, but she had thrown herself into my embrace, when the knife flew through the window, and ended everything. Now, will you send my eldest daughter to me? Will you send 'Rita here? I wish to tell her who she is."

More than two hours elapsed after 'Rita entered her father's library before she came out again. When she did, there was a new-born happiness upon her face, which transfigured it. During the last half-hour of the time, Carla and Edna, also, were present, and they all came out together.

Lathrop was in the drawing-room alone, when Carla entered and closed the door.

"Morris," she said, "I have come to ask your forgiveness. Will you grant it? I think I shall be happy again if you will."

"It is I who need forgiveness, Carla," he replied.

"No, Morris, it is I," the girl insisted,

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tremulously. "Let us be just to ourselves and to each other. I am very happy in the possession of my sister 'Rita—still happier in the knowledge that she is to be your wife. She loves you much more deeply than I ever did. I love you now, better than I did then. Mine was not real love, Morris; it was gratified pride. And, when I forgot myself and did that horrible thing, it was my pride that was suffering, not my love. I have never really loved. I realize that when I look at 'Rita. You are to be my brother, and I shall love you better so than if you had been my husband. Do you understand me, Morris?"

"Yes, Carla, I understand," Lathrop answered, simply. "God bless you, dear."

.

Old Sam Millington was sitting alone in a room in his residence that he used as an office, when there was a ring at the door. Such a thing was almost unprecedented, since the house had been practically closed

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for a year, but he answered the summons, and beheld, standing upon the steps, the figure of a young woman.

"I am Edna Trevor," she said. "May I come in?"

"Certainly," the wondering man assented. "What can I do for you, Miss Edna?"

"You can do a whole lot if you will," the girl replied, walking briskly into his den. "I suppose you know that I am going to marry your son?"

"Well, yes," he answered, smiling. "He told me about it, this morning. I am greatly pleased, and I told him so. Jack is a good boy—and a smart one! But it will be some time before he will be well enough to get married."

"He's well enough now," Edna announced, bluntly.

Then, while the capitalist stared in amazement, she went on rapidly, and told him the whole story from beginning to

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end, omitting nothing; and she did it so quaintly and so energetically that, before she was half-done, the first wrath had gone from his face, and in its stead was an expression of sardonic enjoyment.

"You see," she concluded, "I would not be married under false pretenses. And, then, there was Morris, dying to come to you and let out the whole thing—only, Jack wouldn't let him. So, I just made up my mind that I would do it myself. I am just as deep in the mud as any of them, and I have a right to confess if I wish to. . . . And you will forgive us all, won't you?"

"Edna," said the old man, and his keen eyes were dimmed a little as he looked into the clear, pleading eyes of the girl, "if you will put your arms around my neck, and kiss me, and say 'Thank you, father,' I will promise to forgive."

"You had no need to ask me," Edna made answer. And she threw her arms

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around his neck, and gave him many kisses, and thanked him with every one.

And a month later, when the double wedding occurred, the most spectacular feature of that spectacular event was the sight of those aforetime enemies, George Trevor and Sam Millington, walking happily together up the central aisle of the church, arm-in-arm.

THE END

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